



THE NEW JEDI ORDER

**TALES OF THE
NEW JEDI ORDER**



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STAR WARS: THE NEW JEDI ORDER
TALES OF THE NEW JEDI ORDER

Including short stories by Karen Traviss, Troy Denning, Shane Dix, Elaine Cunningham, Sean Williams & Walter Jon Williams

This anthology contains stories previously published in Star Wars Insider Magazine and as e-books.

Star Wars: Tales of the New Jedi Order

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25,793 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

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FROM THE DESK OF PROFESSOR ELISS

Star Wars Gamer #10

25 ABY, This letter is set before the events of
Vector Prime

I have never told the full story of how I escaped the Emperor's thugs and fled Sanbra to a temporary life in exile on Krinemonen III. Until the signing of the peace accords between the Empire and the New Republic, I never felt safe enough to tell it. Were it not for Professor Mankeskett and his mysterious friend, I would surely have been caught by an Imperial death squad and shot through the brainpan for failing to promote the lie of human superiority.

Mankuskett and a comrade had accompanied me away from campus to the quiet landing pads south of the Shoapy Hostel. At the outskirts, however, a squad of COMPNOR officers blocked the roadway, their lumas shining in our faces. My hearts sinking, I swiveled my eyestalks toward my companions and nearly cried out when I discovered that Mankuskett's friend had vanished. Where a slender Nikto had been just moments ago stood a fresh-faced human man wearing the green uniform and bristle-cut of an Intelligence recruit.

"Two dissidents," he said, nodding toward Mankuskett and me. "Shutting them to the Valiant for questioning."

As we cleared the roadblock and reached the safety of our own ship, I remembered one of the many titles Mankuskett held at Sanbra—Chair of the Council of Metagrowth and Polymorphism. I never found out whether my benefactor was, in fact, a Clawdite, but the fact remains that I owe the last twenty-five years of my life to a changeling's quick thinking.

– Tem Eliss

BOBA FETT: A PRACTICAL MAN

Karen Traviss

25 ABY: This story begins before and continues
during the events of *Vector Prime*.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Boba Fett; Mandalorian Mand'alor (male human)
Briika Jeban; Mandalorian bounty hunter (female human)
Cham Detta; Mandalorian bounty hunter (male human)
Dinua Jeban; Mandalorian bounty hunter (female human)
Goran Beviin; Mandalorian bounty hunter (male human)
Kubariet; Jedi Knight (male humanoid)
Nom Anor; executor (male Yuuzhan Vong)
Suvar Detta; Mandalorian bounty hunter (male human)
Tiroc Vhon; Mandalorian bounty hunter (male human)

Warmaster, we think too often in terms of dualism: Jedi or Sith, light or dark, right or wrong. But there are three sides to this blade, not two, opposed and similar at the same time. The third edge is the Mandalorian. All three sides care nothing for caste or species, only adherence to a code that unites. The Mandalorians remain the most formidable enemy of the Jedi: but the Sith are not always their allies. The Mandalorians even worshipped war itself, then simply turned their backs on their god. You might begin to understand them one day.

– Vergere, explaining galactic politics to the Yuuzhan Vong shortly before their invasion of the galaxy, 25 A.B.Y.

Coruscant, 24 A.B.Y.: lowest level, in a quarter where nobody in their right mind would venture at night.

Boba Fett leveled the blaster and sighted up.

“You can run,” he said. “But you’ll only die tired.”

His voice rasped through an amplifier. He never needed to shout: he could always be heard. His target—a Rodian counterfeiter called Wac Bur, who was unusually overweight for his species—had obliged him by running in ever-more-desperate maze-like circles in the depths of the quarter and had now found himself in a blind alley.

Wac meant lucky in Rodian. Wac Bur was not a lucky example of his kind, not at all.

“Dead or alive,” Fett reminded him. The thermal imager of his blaster optics picked out Wac helpfully radiating heat under a pile of discarded packing cases. “Dead’s easier. Come on. I’m a busy man.”

The voice under the cases was muffled and pathetic. “Why are you doing this to me? I’ve never messed with you, Fett.”

“I know,” Fett said. “But you palmed off fake art on Gebbu. Hutts are very touchy about that.”

It was just like old times. His cloned leg, courtesy of his former Kaminoan guardian Taun We, was still holding up fine in the chase. Fett

never thought of himself as being in any kind of mood, good or bad, but this was as close to noticeably good as he'd been in a long time. He almost felt as if the future might hold something positive. He hadn't had that sense of general optimism since childhood.

The alley was fifteen meters wide and stretched twenty meters ahead of him, with no exits: it was just a box with a terrified Rodian rattling loose in it. A quick scan for weapons—there was no point being careless about this—showed that Wac had a hold-out blaster that wouldn't trouble him. He walked slowly toward the rustling, shivering crates.

"Get a move on," Fett said, checking the chrono in his HUD.

"You haven't got a scrap of morality in you." Wac's insult was rich coming from a criminal forger. "It's not like Gebbu's a victim. Why don't you go after real criminals?"

"Because Gebbu thinks you're special. Are you coming with me or not?"

The packing cases rustled. Wac didn't emerge. It was an answer of sorts.

"Okay, nothing personal," Fett said, and raised his blaster to concentrate on the thermal-imaging target, hold his breath as he had so many times before, and squeeze...

Bar Jaraniz, Nar Shaaddaa: Hutt space, 24 A.B.Y.

The infidels call it preparing the battlefield.

This is the careful, patient work before an attack to ease the path for the army of the faithful that follows. I prepare well: I leave nothing to chance. I'm Nom Anor, executor, and my task is infiltration and destabilization.

And I seek allies in this filthy place.

Do Yuuzhan Vong need allies in this abomination of a galaxy? No. We will, sooner or later, glorify the Great Ones by cleansing these worlds of their machines and the corrupt creatures who willingly enslave themselves to them. But I'm a pragmatist, and pragmatists never waste an advantage, nor leave a powerful army for our enemy to enlist.

Vergere says a group of warriors called the Mandalorians are the most resistant enemy the Jedi have ever faced, other than the Sith. So being a pragmatist, I would rather have them at my side than at my back. And, in the way of all abominations, these Mandalorians sell their act of faith, sacred warfare, for credits. They fight not for gods—they don't seem any more devout than I am—but for wealth.

*What do they find to buy that's more important than honor, though?
Why do I even sully myself by contacting them?*

It needs to be done, and it's more pain I gladly bear.

*As the Mandalorians' skill comes so cheaply, as they have no honor, I
can buy them and use them.*

*So this is a tapcaf. This is where I pretend to be an infidel and speak
reasonably to abominations. I can look like them, and I can talk like them:
but I must never become like them, and I've been hiding among them for
so many years now that I fear I might. As a precaution I entreat Yun-Harla,
just in case she does exist, to guide me so that my life of deception doesn't
finally deceive me.*

*Under the table, where no infidel can see, I pass my knife through my
palm and use the pain both as worship and focus. I have just one more year
to endure before the fleet arrives.*

*I have no faith in the Great Ones, but I might be wrong: and I'm a
pragmatist, so I keep my options open.*

So I shall order...an ale. And I shall sit, and wait.

**Bar Jaraniz, Nar Shaddaa: Buy-One-Get-One-Free Night, fifth month,
24 A.B.Y.**

The sign above the blaster-charred door frame said that the Jara' never closed, and despite any number of gang wars, shoot-outs, and minor armed disagreements between business partners, it hadn't yet.

Goran Beviin walked through the open doors of the Jara'—welded open, for a reason known only to the owner—and paused to scan the unusually crowded bar.

“Over there.” The bartender, preoccupied with building an elaborate cocktail, jerked his head in the direction of the badly-lit booths in the far corner. His hands were full of fruit segments, skewers, and a sky-blue spiral bottle of two-hundred-proof vosh with those nasty little lumps of geref bobbing in it. “The handsome one in the black suit. Lookin’ for Mando help.”

Beviin turned his head discreetly for an old-fashioned visual check by eyeball. *Shab*, the man was ugly. *Seriously ugly*: a face like a speeder smash and half as tidy. Beviin considered offering him a spare helmet for the good of the other customers. But they were as carefully preoccupied as the

bartender, studying the foam blanketing their ale or the solid chunks in their glasses of vosh subliming into vapor. It was the kind of bar where patrons tried very hard not to stare at one another. That normally got you vibrobladed. The management was proud of the bar's strict etiquette on that matter.

Beviin held out his gloved hand for a bottle of ale, planning to drink it later. He wouldn't take his helmet off here. "We don't do beauty therapy." The bartender passed him two, and he slipped both into the pouch hanging from his belt. "Seen him before?"

"No."

"Not a face you'd forget." There was a loud whoop of female voices and laughter from the far side of the bar, and Beviin noted a human woman and a young girl in full true-style beskar'gam—Mandalorian armor—huddled over a table as if sharing a joke. There were a lot of empty glasses on the table next to their blasters. "Ladies' night again, I see."

"Look, I don't want any trouble."

"Not planning any."

"I meant them." The bartender put the finishing touches to the cocktail. "Your womenfolk can get well out of hand."

Beviin didn't recognize them. They seemed to be having a good time, and they certainly didn't seem worried about being the only females in the bar who weren't actually working. There were small Mandalorian communities in this sector, but the Jara' was one of the places mercenaries and bounty hunters touted for work, so the women could have been from anywhere. Their armor—dark red, with the same saber sigil picked out in black on the breastplate—marked them as one clan, and they looked like mother and daughter. Their helmets were stacked on the floor.

"There's only one thing that scares a Mando man," said Beviin, "and that's a Mando woman. Just make sure you don't forget their napkins."

They were still howling with laughter as he made his way across the bar to the booths. He heard the word verd'goten. So the girl had finally completed her training as a warrior: she'd turned thirteen, then, a grown woman by Mando reckoning, trained to fight just the same as a boy. They were celebrating her coming of age. He should have put an ale on the table at the very least, or joined in the oya manda, but he had business to take care of first. Maybe later. The girl—and she looked such a young kid, she really did, even with that unidentifiable dried scalp hanging from one

shoulder plate—made him think it was high time he had a son or daughter to train.

Maybe later.

The man in the black suit watched Beviin's approach, unblinking: the crowd parted to let him through without a word or a glance. Even the gangster clientele here wouldn't risk offending a Mandalorian. Beviin slid into the booth across the table from his prospective client, lifting his holster clear of the seat. He caught a faint metallic whiff of blood in his environment sensor. There must have been a brawl in the bar earlier.

"I hear you people are very good at solving problems," said the man. He had watery blue eyes and a face that looked as if it were a sculptor's first effort at hacking out features from a lump of granite. Not scarred: just crude, brutal, and devoid of any living warmth. He placed both gloved hands flat on the tabletop, one on each side of a glass of colorless liquid. "I have a problem that needs solving."

"I'm Goran Beviin. And you are...?"

"I thought bounty hunters were discreet."

"Discreet, yes. Stupid, no." Protecting client confidentiality was one thing; not knowing who you were dealing with was another entirely. "Once you've taken the risk of telling me what you want, it's either full payment up front or enough information to check that you can pay."

"That's ironic coming from a man who hides behind a helmet."

"I'm Mandalorian." Beviin was aware of movement behind him, and his helmet's wide-angle view picked up the red-armored woman walking past the booths in the direction of the refreshers. "That's usually good enough references for most customers."

Beviin couldn't place his accent. He was forty, maybe forty-five, and he was clearly dissatisfied at not being able to see Beviin's eyes. People always searched for meaning—gaze darting over the visor, up-down, left-right—looking instinctively for facial expressions that just weren't there. Sometimes it was harder doing business with humanoids than with other species, because they just had to see a face. Where was this guy from? Not somewhere used to Mandos, that was for sure.

Shab, he was a grim-looking piece of meat.

And then the man made the mistake of reaching below table level.

Beviin tasted the spike of adrenaline drying his mouth and instantly his hold-out blaster was in the man's face, its indicator red with a full charge. It

was pure reflex, the kind honed by years of war and assassination and just trying to stay alive. He hadn't even thought about it. His hand just did it.

The man blinked and looked to one side, but he didn't seem too worried that Beviin's blaster wasn't the only one leveled at him. The woman in red armor had drawn hers, too, and was standing frozen as if waiting for an order to open fire. The bar was—as usual at moments like this—carefully silent and totally, studiously, self-preservingly uninterested.

“Copaani gaan, burc'ya?” she asked. *Need a hand, pal?*

For all the revelry at her table, she was rigidly sober now: brown hair in a tight braid, hazel eyes that should have had a sparkle in them but were predator-cold. The knuckles of her right hand showed white under an intricate lacework of blue tattoos. Her target stared at them in an oddly absorbed way, as if they held some meaning for him.

Beviin shook his head. *“Naysh a'vor'e, vod.”* *Thanks, sister, but no.* “I'm just a little tense these days.”

She waited two beats before holstering the blaster and going on her way. She'd backed up a brother, even if he was a total stranger. It was the Mando way. Beviin lowered his weapon and leaned back against the wall of the booth, waiting for a response.

“My name is Udelen,” said the man. Voice level, he seemed more curious about the woman, watching her until she was out of sight: no, he didn't scare easily. His gaze fell back on Beviin again. “I need to focus someone's attention.”

“How well?”

“Permanently.”

“Debt? Rivalry?”

“You don't need to know that.”

“Can't price a job without a few details.”

“Very well, rivalry.”

“Care to specify?”

“No.”

“That'll be extra.”

“Are you familiar with the politics of Ter Abbes?”

Beviin activated the head-up display in his helmet with a couple of quick blinks, and icons cascaded down one side of his field of view. “Ter Abbes,” he repeated. The audio feed picked up the words and chewed them over, spitting out a stream of GalaxSat images and police data he shouldn't have

had access to. A grim industrial planet off the main Perlemian Trade Route: a few bad boys passing through now and again, but not exactly a full ten on the Hutt scale of criminality.

What was this guy's game, then? *Politics*. That suddenly didn't sound quite so attractive. Gangsters, debt-dodgers, and assorted hut'uune were fair game, but politicians were a different bucket of chags.

So far, though, this had been a lean year. He had to eat. Bounty-hunting wasn't the kind of business that ran on five-year plans. It was feast or famine, grabbing what you could.

"What did you have in mind?" Beviin asked.

"I need a politician removed," said Udelen.

"In power or not?"

"Does it matter? I want him dead."

Well, that was a complication he didn't fancy. Beviin enjoyed arresting people, and if arresting meant dead, then he was comfortable with that, too. He didn't like subverting elected governments, though, not as long as they hadn't done anything to him or to Mandalorians in general. That was work for spies. He had his limits.

But his farm back on Mandalore was having a tough year. A subsistence, hand-to-mouth, zero-profit year.

"What's he done?"

"He takes bribes."

"No, I mean what's he done that all the others haven't?"

"He hasn't delivered on his promises." Udelen moved his hand to the opening of his jacket with slow deliberation, obviously having learned his lesson, and pulled out a datachip. He slid it across the table toward Beviin, smearing some drops of liquid that might have been condensation from a previously frosted glass. "Here's who I'd like dealt with. I'd like him to cease functioning as a politician before next month's elections."

Beviin slid the chip into the port on his forearm plate, and the data fed straight through to his HUD. The display rolled. Data—numbers, letters, simple icons in one or two colors—merged easily with his field of vision, but a full-color holoimage was intensely distracting. There was a lot of detail demanding attention, and—here was the really hard bit—it was hard to look clean through a face and keep the view beyond under scrutiny when his human brain was wired to concentrate on features. He found himself staring into the eyes of a man who looked straight at him but would never see him.

“Osik...” No, he hadn’t been expecting that face at all. This was no ordinary target, no party drone doing dodgy deals in smoke-filled tapcafs. “This is their opposition leader. Tholote B’Leph? Okay, he was known for his unnatural generosity in awarding government contracts when he was in power, but killing him will start riots across the planet. Wouldn’t you prefer me to break his fingers or something? It usually works.”

Udelen’s grim face cracked slightly. “The aftermath is Ter Abbes’s problem.” He held out his palm for the datachip. “A hundred thousand credits. Usual deal—half in advance when you accept, half on completion, which must be a few days before the election.”

Timing like that meant it wasn’t about wasted bribes. But a hundred thousand was a lot of credits. It was enough to stop him worrying about crops and where the next bounty was coming from for the next few years.

It was also a lot of potential trouble, and maybe more than he could handle alone. His finely-tuned sense of self-preservation grappled with his need to eat.

“I might need to recruit backup. How long have I got?”

“Until the end of our host’s shift,” said Udelen. “Dawn. I’ll be here until then.”

“I’ll be back before then.”

The verd’goten celebration was still in full swing when Beviin left, and he kept an eye on the tattooed red-armored woman in his visor’s 360-degree sensor. She seemed to be keeping an eye on him, too.

He should have stopped by and wished her kid well. If they were still whooping it up after he’d finished talking to the Mand’alor, he’d do just that.

Yes, this job needed to be run past Boba Fett.

Nom Anor: daily report.

Nearly eighteen years; I’ve been away from my own people for too long. But we make home wherever we are, because we have no homeworld now. I hear the Mandalorians have been wanderers, too, and that they were conquerors like us, and their god was war itself. And now—now they are not, and their worship of war itself has vanished because one of their leaders wanted things to be more civilized. They fight other nations’ wars for money, if they fight at all.

When I saw the tattoos on that female's hand, I thought for a moment that there might be a vestige of the true warrior left in the Mandalorians and that they might be like us in valuing their own pain and death. But no—this is vanity, decoration, nothing more. They have no castes, no order, no aspiration to improve the universe or save it. They care only about surviving day to day. Their culture's borrowed, and they no longer impose it on others. They can have no faith in it, then.

What you value and respect, you must make others respect, too. But no matter. They'll still be useful.

Nar Shaddaa: Gladiator assault ship Beroya, airspeeder parking lot.

"Losing your nerve?" Fett asked.

The Mandalore, ruler of the clans, was a shimmering blue holoid image floating above the console of Beviin's assault fighter, cleaning his blaster.

"It's not my usual contract, killing an opposition politico," Beviin said.

"What's bothering you?"

"The civil unrest it'll cause."

"There's always civil unrest," Fett said. "The day you start deciding who's got the moral high ground before you take a bounty, you might as well join the New Republic Army. And they don't let you pick and choose your battles there, either."

Beviin buried his annoyance. Fett had a point: yes, he could be over-picky about contracts and he probably drew too many lines about which assassinations and executions were okay and which weren't. "But this still feels like something beyond punishment for failing to come good for his paymaster."

"Go on."

"It's too strategic. It's the timing."

"It's a hundred thousand creds. When did you last see that kind of money?"

"Okay, let's go through this." From the Gladiator's cockpit, Beviin noted the nervous glances as passersby took sly glances at the dimly-lit canopy of the fighter and realized not only that it was a Gladiator, but also that it was occupied. When he turned his head they scuttled away, fast. Even in a criminal hot spot like Nar Shaddaa, a cannoned-up assault vessel with a Mando pilot on board was a rare sight in the parking lot. "He doesn't just

want me to do a bit of leg-breaking or whacking. He wants an opposition politician taken out just before the election. That's not a reminder that his invoice is overdue for payment."

"So it's political. So is dealing with Hutts."

"No, it's all very...impersonal." Beviin, one eye still on the trickle of lowlives gawping at the Gladiator, gave the navigation lights a quick blip and sent the sightseers running. "I'll exercise...prudence."

Fett was still rolling the EE-3's scope in one hand, clearly distracted. "You need those credits."

Beviin realized that he must have sounded as if he was asking for help. "Not the best year I've had, no."

"I get more offers than I can handle at my age." The hologrammic Fett began clamping the optics back to the blaster's barrel. "Take a couple off my hands sometime."

"Mand'alor—"

"Fett out."

As Beviin walked back to the Jara' to seal the deal with Udelen, he pondered Fett's odd blend of scrupulous detachment punctuated by rare acts of what in any other man might have been regarded as pure sentimentality. More offers than he could handle at his age? He was still top of his game. Offering to put work Beviin's way had nothing to do with the fact that Fett had a fortune and Beviin was struggling most years, no sir. Fett had done a few selfless things—and even if he never admitted it, word got around—because he thought it needed doing.

Because it was right. Fett had his moments. And in the next one he'd blow your head off because it was strictly business.

Beviin reentered the Jara'. Udelen was still there, almost as if he hadn't moved. Beviin glanced to the tables on the other side of the bar: the mother and daughter in red armor were still there, too.

"Deal," he said to Udelen.

The man still had a full glass of clear liquid in front of him, and it didn't appear to have moved, either. He reached inside his jacket—slowly and deliberately—and pulled out a credit chip.

"I'll know when you've completed the task," he said, "and I'll know how to get hold of you again to pay the balance. If I like the results, I'll have plenty of work for you and your comrades."

Beviin liked the sound of that. He took the chip and slotted it into the dataport on his forearm plate to check that it was valid: fifty thousand creds, enough to transform his family's life for a while. The pinpoint of blue light verified it.

"Pleasure doing business," he said.

Udelen bowed his head a fraction, then walked out of the bar with the slow dignity of a funeral bearer. His gait reinforced Beviin's feeling that this wasn't just scumbag-on-scumbag violence. There was more to it.

A coup. It had to be a coup. Funny way to go about it, but sometimes the easiest way to grab power was the least direct. Udelen didn't look like a man who believed in the power of the ballot box. Beviin watched him go, and in a moment of curiosity he pulled off his crushgaunt and dipped a cautious finger into Udelen's apparently untouched drink. It felt like water. He tasted it.

It was water.

Alcohol and business didn't mix anyway. Beviin's business was done, though, so he ordered drinks for the women in red armor and wandered over to their table to put the glasses in front of them. It was just good manners. Some of the patrons lining the bar watched Beviin as if he were trying a pickup line, but they were aruetiise, outsiders, and they didn't understand his obligation.

"Oya, vod'ika," he said to the girl. Non-Mandalorians thought it was just a way of saying cheers, but it was much more than that: *Survive, little sister: Hunt, enjoy life, celebrate your people. "Oya manda."*

"Oya," said the girl. "I'm Dinua."

"And my name's Briika," said her hard-eyed mother. Her name came from the word for "smile," and Beviin enjoyed that kind of irony. She could shrivel anyone with that stare. "Those crushgaunts are illegal. But you know that."

"I just like antiques," Beviin said. He patted the scabbard on his belt, rattling an ancient saber in its sheath. "I've got a proper beskad, too. On the road for a reason?"

"Got to make a living now my old man's dead."

No Mando ever left a widow or orphan to struggle. They shared luck when it came their way, because life was hard and there was no telling when you would be the one in need of some. "Might be able to help there."

Beviin had enough credits in his pocket already to see him and Medrit through the coming year. If Udelen had more work to offer in the weeks to come, there was plenty to go around for Briika and Dinua.

Just like Fett, he couldn't always handle all the work he might be offered.

Nom Anor: intelligence report to Prefect Da'Gara, Yuuzhan Vong fleet. Time to invasion: eight standard weeks, 25 A.B.Y. in the infidel calendar.

The Mandalorians appear to be best suited for infiltration, retrieval, assassination, and sabotage. In the year I've been using them, they've proved reliable. Their small numbers make them worthless as an army, although they might make an excellent enslaved division at a future date.

Goran Beviin did an efficient job of removing B'Leph, and a civil war is still in progress. He recruits equally efficient comrades: even their children are savage fighters.

When I spoke to their leader, the one they call Mandalore—Boba Fett—I feared for a while that he might want more answers than I could give him. But the kind of destabilization and execution they excel at is a normal, everyday occurrence within this corrupt galaxy; he has no reason to wonder why I ask what I do of his people.

He's seen and fought wars before. Like me, he's a realist. A practical man. I almost look forward to meeting him.

Mandalore is already on my list as a world that will be harder to subdue.

Keldabe, capital of Mandalore: outskirts of the city.

Keldabe looked like a run-down factory complex that someone had dumped in a forest and abandoned because it was too much trouble to dispose of it properly.

I don't even live here. And I'm the head of state.

Fett took Slave I low over the Mandalore forests forty-five degrees north of the equator and reminded himself that it was at least a good planet to defend if push came to shove. The resident population hovered around a modest four million; Coruscant had small neighborhoods with more citizens than that. Like Concord Dawn and the rest of the sector, this was hard frontier country, just jungle, forest, desert, and plains on which farmers

made little impact. In galactic terms, it was a small city that outsiders mistook for a world.

That's fitting. A few Mandalorians are an army, after all.

The comm on the console chirped. "Mand'alor, Udelen's ship just landed at the spaceport."

"I'll be right behind him," said Fett. "Keep an eye on him in the meantime."

"We keep an eye on everyone."

Slave I could navigate for herself, but Keldabe was one location that even a novice pilot could fly by sight. It was—in basic terms—a very large hill-fort ringed by a bend in the Kelita River and beyond that woodland studded with settlements. The sprawl of buildings that made up MandalMotors was the biggest feature in the landscape, and if Fett used the plant's hundred-meter tower as a navigation transit with the comm mast for the spaceport, he could line up and drop neatly onto the landing strip.

Mandalore was MandalMotors, thousands of tiny engineering workshops, subsistence farms, ore mining, and an awful lot of trees—and that was the sum of it. Without the beskar deposits, the unique Mandalorian iron ore, there was nothing remarkable about the place except the people. And the beskar had been largely stripped by the Empire.

Maybe if they were more formally organized...no, Fett shook away the thought. Mandos were as organized as they needed to be to survive.

And, being Mandos, they didn't lay on a red carpet and a band to welcome their leader either. Fett settled Slave I on her dampers in a designated bay like anyone else, and walked across the strip.

He opened his comlink to the tower. "Which ship?"

"The blue one that looks like a T-77." There was a pause, as if the control room skipper had leaned out of earshot to consult someone else. "There's a grenade launcher trained on it, ret'lini—just in case."

Fett didn't take offense at anyone thinking he needed backup. He'd never needed anyone to cover his back, but Mandalorians always had a plan B "just in case." It was almost a reflex, the kind that was ingrained in a militarized society.

Fett thought it was a courteous precaution even if he didn't need it. He activated Slave I's weapons panel via his helmet link, calculated the coordinates of Udelen's ship, and let her do the rest. The icon in his HUD told him the port laser cannon had swiveled to the forward position to rest

its aim on the blue airspeeder. His jetpack was primed for evasive action. *Just in case* was deeply ingrained in Fett, too.

He stood in front of the vessel at a sensible distance and waited for his potential client to come down the ramp.

"I hadn't expected Mandalore to be so...unspoiled," said Udelen. "Somehow I thought it would be more industrialized. You even have some dwellings set in trees."

"We have all kinds of housing," Fett said. *What is he, a tourist?* "Some locals still prefer trees to ground level."

"Who runs your government? Who are the administrators?"

Why do you care? "Mandalorians like things informal and friendly. What did you want to discuss?"

Udelen stopped for a fraction of a heartbeat so barely noticeable that even Fett nearly missed it. Maybe he didn't like his questions being dismissed. He recovered instantly. "I came to tell you that your people can expect to be busy in the next few months. A war is coming."

"You must be new in this galaxy," Fett said, totally unsurprised. "There's always a war going on somewhere, always has been, always will be. It's why Mandalorians have never gone out of business."

"It could escalate."

"Will it affect the Mandalore sector?"

Udelen paused, and Fett didn't care for his suddenly satisfied expression. "We can hope that it won't."

Don't play mind-games with me. I know blackmail when I hear it. "Whoever might be thinking of fighting here better hope so, too."

Fett didn't think Udelen was quite as ugly as Beviin had described; there was a faint but distinctive smell about him, though. It reminded Fett of the sea spray churned up by the storms on Kamino in his childhood. Smells could always take you back.

"I assume our arrangement extends to mercenary work, then," Udelen said. "Usual rates."

"Not all Mandalorians are mercs. They choose the work they take."

"Then I'll be asking you and a few troops of your choosing to stand by for rendezvous in two weeks' time."

"Better tell me what to expect, so we bring the right tools for the job." *I'm not your army, chum. I'm my own boss.* "We reserve the right to decline your offer, as always."

“You haven’t asked who the combatants will be.”

“You weren’t going to tell me.”

“True.”

“So I’ll assume the worst.”

Udelen almost smiled. Fett didn’t like that, either. Even while the credits kept coming, he decided he’d keep an open mind about his client’s largesse.

The core of Mandalorian bounty hunters and troops Udelen seemed to like to have on call were doing okay financially. That was fine—as long as Udelen understood that the legendary Mandalorian discipline wasn’t dumb obedience. Even a Mandalore had to understand that.

Fett watched the airspeeder lift off and disarmed Slave I’s cannon via his helmet link.

But he knew the spaceport control tower would be tracking it until it left Mandalore’s orbit. Just in case.

Nom Anor’s notes: final intelligence assessment. ETA for vanguard of Yuuzhan Vong fleet: two days.

Some days I almost find kinship with Mandalorians. Some of them actually prefer living homes, not built-things like other infidels. They create homes on platforms in the branches of trees. And then I see them as they are, with their passion for wholly artificial technology. Yes, I blow hot and cold over them, as the infidels say. But I don’t need to like them, only to understand how useful they are for the subtle things in war that the sheer force of our fleet can’t always achieve. They’ve helped me prepare the battlefield: now we’ll see how they respond to the prospect of the battle itself.

I’ve asked Fett to rendezvous with me at a point on our invasion route. I want the Mandalorians to be among the first to see their new masters as we enter this galaxy.

The fleet is nearly here. I won’t have to disguise myself and hide any longer.

Rendezvous point with Udelen’s forces, strength and type unspecified, for a briefing at Outer Rim: 25 A.B.V.

“If anything happens to me, will you take care of Dinua?”

Briika Jeban's voice broke the silence on the shared comlink as the squadron waited for Udelen to appear. Beviin, fed up with waiting and reduced to staring through the Gladiator's canopy at the veil of stars and gas clouds, jerked back to the here and now.

"Yes," he said. "But nothing's going to happen to anybody. Anyway...yes."

"Do I get a say in this?" asked Dinua. Beviin wasn't sure if she was reminding them she was a fourteen-year-old adult who could speak for herself, thanks, or if she preferred the idea of *gai bal manda*—adoption, literally name and soul—by someone else. It was usually the former. "And no, nothing's going to happen to anyone."

Death was the ever-present reality in this business. Beviin knew Dinua missed her father, and even if he could never be more than a friend and brother to Briika, his duty was to make sure her daughter—even as an adult—would never be an orphan. If only Fett had been truly part of the Mandalorian community, Beviin thought: someone would have adopted him so that he always had a family whether he needed one or not. But nobody had raised the issue with him. They probably never would. He wasn't a family man, and there was still no room for anyone in his life except Jango's ghost.

"I'll take that as agreement," said Beviin. "And I promise that if I ever adopt you, I won't make you wear frilly dresses."

Loud guffaws, Dinua's included, filled his audio link, but Fett was silent: there wasn't even a rebuke. On station around him, clustered around Slave I, were the two women in their Aggressor fighters and the Detta brothers—Cham and Suvar—with Tiroc Vhon, all in Gladiators.

"The only thing anyone's going to die of today is boredom," Cham said. "We haven't missed the time window, have we?"

"No," Fett's voice cut in. "We haven't. He has—nearly."

Beviin powered up his thrusters. "I'll go scout around."

The Gladiator turned 180 degrees and looped away Coreward before coming back in a U-turn. It wasn't boredom, although nothing was happening. The others might not have said it, but everyone was feeling that moment of doubt when you considered how little you knew for sure about your client, and—more to the point—how little you knew about the situation your client was about to get you into. The rendezvous was simply for a briefing. That was the point: not a battle, sight unseen, enemy

unknown, but a briefing, so that they could regroup afterward with their new intel and prepare themselves properly. If you took mercenary work, Beviin reasoned, you accepted that clients sometimes put you lower on their need-to-know list than their regular troops.

Yes, I'd adopt Dinua. Medrit would agree.

But it wouldn't come to that. Beviin flew back along the route he'd taken, checking his long-range scans for fast-moving objects or vehicles exiting hyperspace.

Gai bal manda: like all the Mandalorian ceremonies, it was short and to the point. Nobody had the time, patience, or credits to waste on lavish events. Get the business over, and hope still to be alive for a few bottles of narcolethe or net'ra gal later...

The proximity sensor blipped, and Beviin switched his attention from his HUD to the transparent canopy of the Gladiator.

He always preferred visual confirmation. For a moment he thought the scan was acting up, because the unknown ship—and it had to be a ship, given the speed at which it was moving—was showing a profile more like an asteroid, a mass of mineral readings, and it was big, well over a thousand meters and maybe two. But this wasn't an asteroid belt. Shab, the Glad's instruments needed calibrating again. Some of his newly-earned credits would already be hemorrhaging from his pocket.

The ship appeared to be aft of him, and he didn't trust the scan to keep him clear of trouble. Banking to starboard with a quick burn, he came about in a wide arc to get a visual on whatever was on his tail.

And there was a large object in range. That was about the best he could manage.

What he saw made no sense. It glittered in places where the harsh white light of the star caught it and...no, it was an asteroid after all. The shape was more regular and oval than the usual shattered chunks, and it wasn't rotating and tumbling like the big ones usually did, but it—

Oh. No, that's not happening.

In that way of glimpsing things out of context, Beviin had a split second of total illogical illusion: his brain told him explosion, debris, brace for impact. He almost ducked before he realized the massive lump of rock was following a course with all the purpose of a warship. Almost without thinking, he flicked his visor to maximum magnification and saw a craggy gray rock with unusually regular bands of black glossy material like some

igneous mineral or tektite. Trailing from its bows, almost like the barbels of an ice-river vaban, were brilliant scarlet and blue branch-like growths, some with tapered purple sac-like pods attached to them.

The pods seemed about the size of an X-wing.

Beviin flicked open the comlink in his helmet. “Mand’alor,” he said. “Patch into my video circuit, will you?”

“I can see it fine from here.” Boba Fett’s voice was perfectly calm. “In fact, I can see more of them...”

“That’s navigating.” It was Briika’s voice on the comlink now. All their helmets and systems linked to share data. “That’s a fleet.”

“We’ve seen fleets before.”

“Not like that one, Mand’alor.”

“We don’t know if it’s hostile or just freight passing through...” Beviin, doing what he’d been drilled to do without question or argument all his life, moved into formation with the other fighters to flank Slave I. “But it isn’t in my *Mandos’ Big Book of Friendly Warships*, so let’s not get caught with our kut’ike around our ankles, shall we?”

A battle formation was usually four Gladiators linked to a Pursuer, yet this motley squadron slotted together, wordless and automatic. Beviin watched his comrades’ weapon icons illuminate almost simultaneously in his HUD. Slave I already had missile, cannon, and torpedo lock on the vanguard ship. No, Fett wouldn’t get caught with his pants down either.

The other asteroid vessels were now visible, line astern, both on the scan and in visual range. One eased out to port and broke from the line, heading for the Mandalorian squadron.

“Steady,” said Fett. “Whites of their eyes...”

Cham’s snort was audible. “They better *have eyes*.”

The lead ship—if that was what it was—would have stretched from one end of Beviin’s farm boundary to the other. It was monstrous in every sense of the word, and all the worse for being frankly unrecognizable as a vessel. The audio feed in his helmet clicked as Fett transmitted.

“Unidentified vessels, this is Slave One.” Fett should have been anxious, Beviin thought, but there was never a trace of it in his voice. Maybe after you survived the Sarlacc, nothing ever really scared you again. “I have no transponder code for you. Identify yourself.”

There was softly-hissing silence, and Beviin somehow expected nothing else. Which one would respond? His attention moved between his cockpit

scan and the void beyond his canopy, now both full of targets that could only be a fleet of vessels. No natural phenomenon behaved with that much purpose. He tightened his fingers around the control stick and rolled his thumb across the tilting ball that would fire one or all of the four cannons. If they could make more than a dent in the fleet—well, he'd take out what he could.

Why do I automatically assume they're hostile?

Why didn't I call home and talk to Medrit when I had the chance?

I knew I'd never die in my sleep, but this isn't how I thought it'd be.

He'd lost count of the behemoths now. His scan screen was so full of points of light tagged UNIDENTIFIED that he couldn't put a pin between them. The void of space that filled the transparisteel canopy was peppered with stars of reflected light, as if a new galaxy had suddenly arrived.

The cloud of objects—of ships—was on course for Belkadan.

"Mandalorians," said a familiar voice over the comlink. "We come to free you and your entire galaxy from the heresy of technology and teach you respect for the Great Ones."

"Udelen..." Beviin said.

"I am Nom Anor, executor, and what you see is the vanguard of the Yuuzhan Vong fleet. It has taken decades to reach here, and now your galaxy will be reformed. Transformed."

Beviin heard Fett's slight intake of breath. Coming from him, that was a yelp of surprise.

"I think some people might want to discuss that first," Fett's weapons were still locked on. "Depending on what you mean by reformed."

"You would call this an invasion. And you have the privilege of being among the first infidels to witness our arrival."

Beviin hung on a frozen second, unsure whether to open fire or wait for Fett's orders. Yes. It really was a new galaxy that had come to visit. He struggled to take it in. On the open comlink, everyone's breathing was audible, and it sounded urgent, shallow—afraid.

"Fett, follow these coordinates and enter my ship. We'll show you the future of your galaxy, and how you'll play your part in achieving this much-needed transformation."

Fett's response would normally have been a well-aimed ion-cannon round and a fast escape. Nothing changed or charged up on the shared HUD display. Beviin heard him swallow before responding.

"I'll leave my troops to await my safe return, then."

"No need for you all to enter, I agree. And you'll vouch for them."

"Given the size of your fleet, what could a few small ships do anyway?"

"Mand'alor, I'll escort you," Beviin interrupted. Planning and thought never came into it. He heard himself react. We rally to the Mandalore. This is how we survive. "I'll follow you in."

"When I find out what in means," said Fett, "then do it."

Beviin powered down his weapons and swung the Gladiator in behind Slave I as the vessel edged forward toward the giant scarred rock of a warship. "Ke'pare," he whispered down the comlink. Fett didn't speak Mando'a, but neither would these Yuuzhan-whoever-they-were. Almost no aruetii did. "Ke baslana meh mhi Kyrayc."

Stand by, and get out if we don't make it.

They'd know what to do, and when to do it. It was hard-wired and hard-trained into all of them.

The gray asteroid became a mountain range that filled his field of view as he trailed behind Slave I's thrusters at a safe distance into a mouth-like opening of the warship.

"Oya," Suvar responded. *Go get 'em. And stay alive.*

Funny word, oya. It adapted to any situation. Oya. Beviin seized it for courage.

He had the feeling he had seen *nothing* yet.

Nom Anor: docking bay of the miit ro'ik.

The warriors ask if the Mandalorians are the droids the infidels use. They cluster around the little fighter craft and stare at the metal figures that climb out. They might as well be, because they seem to have surprisingly little fight in them for professional soldiers; we'd have fought back by now.

They are excellent saboteurs, though.

I hope Fett avoids using his jetpack. The warriors would be enraged to see artificial combustion, the first abomination. They're already disgusted that I let these infidel Mandalorians bring their machines into this miit ro'ik, and they dislike my use of the infidel comlink, but I'm an Executor, and they don't dare argue with me.

I can't see these infidels' faces, but I know they're amazed by the perfection they see. Fett is looking everywhere, studying everything, if the

movements of his head are anything to go by. I hear he has impressive scars: but they were merely an accident. His lackey, Beviin...he follows his master. They might well fit into the natural order of things, after all.

Yuuzhan Vong miit ro'ik warship.

Beviin couldn't be heard outside his helmet, but he still whispered as he walked along the living corridor behind Fett into the heart of the ship.

"How was I supposed to know what he was?"

"You weren't." That ugly barve Udelen—Nom Anor—had fooled everyone. How he disguised a mutilated face like that was a miracle. Fett had a good look at his real face now. "And better that we find out what we're dealing with than get a surprise like the rest of the galaxy."

"This isn't going to be like the good old Sith and Jedi puppet show, is it?"

"I don't know. All that matters is if there's something in it for Mandalorians."

Fett didn't expand, not then. He had his father's nose for trouble, and he smelled it this time like never before. The ship itself was bad enough: for all the vibrant color on every surface and crew member, it was like being in a stinking cave infested with unrecognizable vermin. There wasn't a smooth, spotless durasteel bulkhead or reassuring piece of normal cleanly-oiled engineering to be seen.

Yes, it had a distinct scent, the smell of damp forest and weed drying on beaches and a hint of blood.

It was like being in something's guts. It was like being back in the Sarlacc.

And it was the smell of Udelen when he met him at Keldabe spaceport. *I didn't see this coming. I should have. And now I know—well, maybe this is the best position to be in.*

Fett ran every recording and analysis device in his helmet as he walked through the ship, from penetrating radar to thermal imaging. Every so often he stopped and touched the—no, not bulkheads, walls. He couldn't shake the idea of stomach walls. He wiped his fingertips along them, feigning awe and curiosity, and then discreetly transferred whatever organic traces he'd picked up on his gloves to one of the pouches on his belt.

“Samples,” he said quietly. “Anything small—any bits of this thing you can steal—pocket it. Okay?”

“Got you,” said Beviin.

What he needed most of all, though, was a slice of the Yuuzhan Vong invader who walked ahead of him, a snake-like thing coiled up one arm. It was alive.

“Pet?” he asked. Jabba always kept some weird wildlife that amused him. Maybe Yuuzhan Vong did the same. “A familiar?”

“Weapon,” said Nom Anor. He shook it off his arm in one elegant gesture; it stiffened immediately into a rod before writhing back into coils and slithering back onto the executor’s arm. “A living weapon called an amphistaff.”

Fett had done business with the worst of life-forms, and it never seemed to matter either way who was running the galaxy. Small lives went on in the social undergrowth, a grim quest for daily survival, and the power floated to the top and was misused and sucked dry for advantage. Fett just took his cut and satisfied himself with living by his own code, because he was a practical man and knew what he could and could not change about the galaxy.

But the Yuuzhan Vong seemed to think there was nothing they couldn’t change about it.

Nom Anor, stripped of his human disguise and black business suit, strode along pointing out organic technology with a pride bordering on arrogance and then stepping clean across that line.

“I’ve been among you infidels eighteen years,” he said. “Not once have I found a pure culture with fully organic technology.”

Beviin muttered, audible only to Fett. “Aruetii. We’re not his best buddies any longer, then.”

“We do our best,” Fett said to Nom Anor. “You’ll have to teach us how to do things right.”

As they ambled through the ship, Beviin appeared to trip and steady himself against a wall from time to time, or pick up something of no consequence from the deck. *Good man.*

“We will,” said Nom Anor. The warriors were giving him a wide berth.

“So you’re a senior officer.” *Investigate, record, understand. Intelligence saves your life sooner or later.* “Commander?”

"I'm intendent caste," said Nom Anor. "An executor. My caste are administrators. That makes me superior in the hierarchy to a warrior."

It was almost as if the Yuuzhan Vong had set out to compile a list of things that Mandalorians found repellent and then ram them down their throats to make a point of how alien they were. A bureaucrat and spy, lording it over a soldier, looking down his nose—

Fierfek, the barve didn't even *have* a nose.

Fett stared at the warriors he passed. They were covered in the most impractical armor he'd ever seen, literally encased from head to foot, with huge, savage, claw-like projections on shoulders and knees, wrists, and even the backs of their legs. They never sat down on duty, that was for sure. As one soldier passed, what Fett thought was a brilliantly-varnished scarlet decoration on his chest suddenly moved. It was a beetle, a huge beetle.

Fett switched to voice projection. Now wasn't the time to get prissy about cultural differences. "What's that armor made from?"

"Not made," said Nom Anor. "Bioengineered. A living vonduun crab, and technology is a poor second to it. Blasters won't penetrate the shell."

Go ahead, tell me all your trade secrets. If I make it out alive—"They'd fetch a good price."

"And they kill anyone but the warrior for whom they were grown."

"You've not come on a sales mission, then."

Nom Anor might have smiled as he turned his head to glance at Fett, but with a mutilated face like that it was hard to tell. His mouth was set in a permanent rictus of a humorless grin, devoid of lips.

"We've come to claim this galaxy and colonize it. I did say invasion, did I not?"

There were millions of planets in the galaxy and someone was always invading and colonizing someone else. It was inevitable. But Fett hadn't come across anyone with ideas about taking over the whole galaxy before, unless he counted Palpatine. "And you think we'll help you do it."

"You have little choice."

"And you're going to have to fight your way across this galaxy, a world at a time, and you know it. Why did you recruit us if you thought you could do it alone?"

"Are you asking for more credits?"

Fat lot of good the creds would do us if these things succeed. "Maybe."

"You attempt to blackmail me?"

"I'm telling you that it's easier to do it with us than without us."

"You're being paid."

"It's not enough."

"You're in no position to bargain."

"I think I am."

Beviin sounded as if he was holding his breath. Fett could see him, arms slightly away from his sides, and he could also see where he was directing his visual scan from the shared icon in his own HUD. Beviin was checking out the deckhead of the ship. Fett reverted to the closed comlink. "Don't even think about it."

"Just checking."

"Just recce."

There was a time for shooting your way out of trouble and a time for *reasoning* an escape. Survival depended on finding out as much about the enemy as you could.

Besides, were these creatures any more of an enemy than a Sith empire or a Jedi republic? He'd done business with a lot worse. Right now, they were still customers—but only just. He could get something out of them.

"I want to know exactly what you want from us," Fett said, moving his gaze slowly left to right and back again as he walked. The sensors in his helmet range finder and the penetrating radar built up a more detailed three-dimensional plan with each sweep. A med scanner and a mining probe might have done the job better, though. "And what do you want from the galaxy?"

Nom Anor stopped at a ragged opening in the bulkhead and gestured them inside. "I thought I'd made this clear. Surrender and obedience."

Dream on, barve. "Be specific."

"We'll cleanse your galaxy of technology and replace it with ours. Organic technology. Living technology. No machines, no artificial combustion, no artifacts. These are, you'll come to understand, an abomination and an insult to the Great Ones. To the gods themselves."

Fett had a sudden image of having a crab-suit grown on him. No. That was not going to happen. "And our role in this great scheme?"

"Intelligence gathering and the more subtle work we require."

Fett still didn't have a clear idea of what Nom Anor meant by organic technology. Some species made limited use of it, but it looked nothing like what he was seeing, smelling, and hearing now: grotesque men encased in

living crabshell, weapons that were animals, ships that were miniature planets.

“Show me,” said Fett.

What did you call an enclosed space in a Yuuzhan Vong ship? A cabin, a compartment, a hangar? They walked into a chamber that felt to Fett like a stomach. The bulkheads might have been set with glowing, moving, beetle-like lumps, but he couldn’t shake the analogy now. Another bizarre figure—a warrior, possibly, but maybe a different specialty or caste judging by the lack of clawed armor—crouched on the deck, arms clasped over his head. When he moved, there was some kind of armor gorget at the base of his throat.

But the trouble with staring at something you didn’t quite recognize was that it suddenly shifted into perspective and context, and you could see it for what it was with shocking clarity. Fett realized he wasn’t looking at a Yuuzhan Vong.

“What the shab have you done to him?” Beviin asked.

It was a human male, more or less.

The nape of his neck skin was covered in grimy pink lumps that looked at first like knobbly vertebrae that disappeared under a rough gray shirt but on second glance appeared more like stone. It was hard to tell how old he was or where he came from; the visible skin was olive and smooth. His head was shaven. But he was human, or humanoid, all right.

Nom Anor looked down at the figure with detached interest.

“We took this prisoner on Ter Abbes. The yorik-kul implant is an experimental one, a new strain.”

He caught the man’s shoulder with one hand and jerked him half-upright so that his head lolled back as if drunk. The object that Fett had taken for a gorget, an armored throat piece, was the same bone-like pink mass as the knobs on the back of the prisoner’s neck. Ridges in it aligned with the knobs. Fett suddenly saw the lumps as the ends of projections from the gorget that somehow passed clean through the prisoner’s neck, and it was one of those images that he put out of his mind the moment it formed.

The man didn’t seem to be in pain. His eyes were glazed and fixed on the mid-distance. Fett concentrated on staying detached even though the animal core of him was revolted and telling him to run for it.

“You going to explain that?”

"It's coral," said Nom Anor. "It colonizes the body and enables us to control captives and turn them into productive slaves. This specimen was a little different and so our shapers are observing how the yorik-kul adapts to him. The process is...incomplete."

"And that's what you have in mind for the whole galaxy, is it?" *Don't say a word, Beviin.* "All of us."

Nom Anor's eyes darted across Fett's visor. They still looked like the trapped remnants of a human, and Fett kept thinking cyborg, and how ironic that would be for a species that found machines an abomination. *Abomination.* Religious word. And he didn't trust cults any more than he trusted politicians and accountants.

"Not necessarily as slaves," said Nom Anor.

"Good. Because it's going to be a tough sell."

"Some will see the truth and *become* Yuuzhan Vong."

"And those who don't? Let me guess."

"They'll be Yuuzhan Vong, or they'll be dead."

This was the point at which Nom Anor ceased to be simply unpleasant business and became something Fett hadn't really seen before: a threat he might not be able to handle.

It was as if the executor changed before his eyes, shifting subtly from just a hideously disfigured face made worse by its few vestiges of normality into something totally alien he had to be able to kill. It felt personal for a moment, and that was anathema. The trick was to understand the enemy without identifying with him. Now he'd name his higher price. He knew exactly what he had to demand.

"As long as we work for you," Fett said, "you leave the Mandalore sector alone."

Nom Anor stared into Fett's visor and Fett stared back, his helmet cam recording, even if the executor couldn't tell that. The creature's face was a nightmare, a corpse from a battlefield: nose and lips missing, leaving a hole in the center of his face set above teeth that were every bit as human as his own. His skin was a mass of puckered but regular scars and intricate tattoos. A thick ridge of bone or scar tissue—Fett wasn't sure which—ran from under his sunken eye sockets to the back of his hairless, scarred, tattooed scalp.

It was just the eyes and the teeth.

They were utterly human, as if someone were trapped in a monstrous suit and trying to get out. The image clicked into place almost like an overlay on a holochart. Fett suddenly imagined what Nom Anor might have looked like with a nose, and a mouth, and regular skin. He imagined what the warriors would look like: because these invaders all had the same terrible faces. They mutilated themselves deliberately.

Fierfek. If that's what they do to themselves...

"You still try to bargain with me," said Nom Anor.

"That's my price. It goes up when I find clients haven't been totally open with me." *Like not mentioning a galactic invasion.* Fett was the one doing the buying now, though: he was buying time. "You're going to have to fight for every meter of ground here. Thousands of sentient species, countless worlds, and every one will put up a fight. You need us. If only to deal with the Jedi."

"And I could kill you now, of course."

"I'm one man. The clans will find a new Mandalore right away, and then they'll fight. Your call."

Beviin muttered irritably, "Thanks, 'Alor."

The prisoner began moaning incoherently and slumped back on the deck, convulsing, eyes rolled back in his head. Nom Anor watched him with apparent fascination, making no attempt to help, and for a second Fett seriously considered drawing his blaster and putting the wretched man out of his misery. He decided it wasn't his business, but he also knew he would regret not doing it for the rest of his life.

Another Yuuzhan Vong entered the compartment, as tattooed and mutilated as Nom Anor but wearing a draped charcoal-gray robe—for want of a better word—that seemed to be stapled to his flesh, from shoulders to scalp. These people liked pain. Fett could grit his teeth and take it, but there was endurance, and then there was the sick, disturbing fondness for it; and pain looked like it was central to the Yuuzhan Vong way of life.

He'd seen enough. Or at least he thought he had.

The new Yuuzhan Vong bent over the prisoner slumped on the floor and took a firm grip of the coral gorget to wrench it out of his neck. The captive looked dead: Fett was pretty good at spotting dead now.

Beviin, standing with fists on hips and outwardly impassive, swore angrily in the privacy of the helmet comlink. "I want to hunt down every last crab-boy in the galaxy," he muttered. Beviin was usually the most

easygoing of men, and the venom in his voice surprised Fett. “Whether you have a deal with them or not, Mand’alor.”

Two freakish creatures with far less exotic scars and tattoos than Nom Anor arrived with a new prisoner, a thin male Twi’lek in late middle age, and he was terrified, struggling, screaming. Fett wasn’t squeamish, but his code of honor said that you killed cleanly, and pain was a side-effect, not a hobby. It happened fast: the hired help held down the Twi’lek and the creature in the stapled robe simply rammed the yorik-kul that had been ripped from the dead victim up into the sternum of the new prisoner, so hard that the nodules broke through the skin of his neck, leaving him gurgling and choking. The surgical shock should have killed him, but somehow the crab-boys—Beviin had a gift for well-crafted abuse—could keep him alive.

Fett made a point of not looking at Beviin in case it started him off. He could hear him grinding his teeth and swallowing hard. If Beviin gave in to his urge to sort things out with a blaster for one victim, there would be an awful lot more in the Mandalore system who paid the price.

“Easy, Goran,” he whispered into the HUD comlink. *Fierfek, I’ve never used his first name, ever.* “Time for that later.”

Fett couldn’t begin to imagine the pain. He knew now that he despised the Yuuzhan Vong, not for their apparent asceticism and brutality, but for their greedy indulgence of a perversion. It was as weak in its way as drunkenness and glitterstim addiction. He also despised Nom Anor for crude theatrics designed to show him what would be in store for Mandalore if he didn’t comply.

Your threats will only motivate me more.

Nom Anor considered Fett’s price with visible slowness. “The Mandalore sector will not be touched,” he said.

Liar. You’ll swarm across the galaxy and when it suits you, you’ll come back for us. You lived a lie among us for eighteen years, so one more lie just rolls off that tongue of yours...

Fett swallowed his revulsion. “Then based on that, we have a deal.”

And I’m a liar too, because we don’t.

No, Fett was keeping his word. It mattered to him to phrase his acceptance carefully so he could thwart these monsters every step of the way and retain his sense of honor. *My word is my bond, and you lied to me.*

Beviin reached down and picked up a fragment of the living coral that had broken off from the dead prisoner, casual as a man gathering firewood.

“Your next task is to secure a landing zone for us at Birgis,” said Nom Anor. He handed Fett a data-chip, and that must have rankled: filthy technology. “Here’s the reconnaissance data we’ve just received, in a format that you can use. We could simply destroy the surface from orbit, because the planet will be reshaped and reengineered to our requirements anyway, but we wish to take the inhabitants alive to work for us.”

“When?” Fett asked.

“Five days’ time.”

“We’d better get moving, then.”

It was hard not to break into a jog down that gullet of a corridor. Beviin strode alongside him, one hand on his belt pouches as if protecting their contents. They split up in the docking bay area and went to their respective vessels, watched by silent Yuuzhan Vong warriors, a forest of grotesque thorn-trees with snakes clinging to them, the cold black future of the galaxy, and suddenly everything he detested.

Beviin powered up the Gladiator’s ion drive. Armored warriors stepped back; one stood his ground and watched, arms folded across his chest. Fett tapped Slave I’s console, and the Firespray came alive with a rising whine that settled into a steady note. The Gladiator lifted a few meters clear of the deck and hung back. Beviin was waiting for him to maneuver.

“You first,” said Fett. “We’ve got some planning to do.”

“You can’t believe they’re serious about the deal.” Beviin was loyal to his Mandalore, ever the traditional Mando’ad, but that also meant he reserved the right to tell the Mandalore to go stuff himself if he’d made a visibly suicidal choice. “Not after what we saw.”

Fett took Slave I on manual toward the irregular opening that passed for the main hatch. “No. And neither am I, and let’s assume he knows it.”

“If he knows anything about Mandos, he has to realize we’re polar opposites to the crab-boys.” Beviin cleared the bay, the drives flaring faintly violet as he picked up speed. The Gladiator looked like a flattened oval until it climbed steeply, suddenly becoming the characteristic shape of a saber thrust through a shield. “Slaves, caste systems, crazy gods—the shabuir said you were either Yuuzhan Vong or you were dead.”

“I like my armor the way it is. Cold metal.”

Beviin sounded like he was struggling to sound disenchanted rather than consumed by loathing. “Credits don’t matter anymore. Nothing worth buying in a vong’yc galaxy anyway.”

“I know that. So we’re going to spoil their grand plan.”

No Mandalorian would have taken the Yuuzhan Vong credits if they’d known them for what they were. But Fett had done the deal, and now he had to choose: turn on them and fight, as the rest of the galaxy would, or use the precarious inside track they now occupied to do as much damage to the invaders as possible.

“What do you have in mind? It’ll take time to mobilize a whole army on Mandalore.”

“And we’ll take massive casualties if we make a move before we know exactly what we’re dealing with here. This is technology we’ve never seen before.”

“Sit and wait? You must be—”

“They fooled us. Now we fool them. We play nice and look like we’re on their side while we gather intel until we have enough to hit them hard. We pretend to be in it for the money.”

Fett didn’t know how much time they had. In the end, the Yuuzhan Vong would come for Mandalore to remake it as a world of living machines and parasitized slaves like every other planet. It was only a question of when. Fett took off his left gauntlet and ran his fingertips over the smooth composite of Slave I’s console, one of the few original parts of the ship left from his father’s time. Refit after refit had changed her capabilities almost beyond recognition, but if Jango Fett were to return now, he would snap the pilot restraint into a sitting position, check the console for dust and smears like he usually did, and feel right at home. He wouldn’t feel at home in an enslaved galaxy with one brutal culture that had erased any trace of Jaster Mereel’s heritage.

Fett checked his fingertips for dust. Slave I was spotless. She didn’t look like what she really was, either. This was going to be a little war of deception. He hoped Nom Anor appreciated irony.

Beviin was chewing it over. “We still can’t fight the crabs alone. What about the New Republic? They’ll need whatever intel we get.”

“Can’t trust them. We didn’t spot Nom Anor. Those disguises they use mean they could be anybody.”

“We might have to trust them.”

“We could slip them the data we’ve got now. Test the water. Find out the hard way.”

“And if the New Republic blows our cover, for whatever reason, and the Vongese take their revenge on Mandalore—”

“—then we fight to the last, or we go and find those other galaxies the Yuuzhan Vong say are out there.”

“It’s too far.”

“And death’s too final. So we’d better win.”

“Your father would be proud of you, Bob’ika.” Beviin was younger than Fett, but he still called him by the kid’s form of his name. Sometimes it irked Fett and sometimes it didn’t. Right then, it was fine. “For a man who says he doesn’t care about anyone else, you always come good for the Mando’ade when you’re needed.”

“I’m Mandalore. It’s just my job.”

“Course it is,” said Beviin. “I believe you.”

The Aggressors and Gladiators holding position at the rendezvous point looked pathetically small. Behind them, the waves of Yuuzhan Vong ships speckled the void. It was as eloquent a summary of the odds as Fett had ever seen: bad, and not even worth counting.

It wouldn’t have bothered Jango Fett, though. And so it wouldn’t bother him.

Nom Anor: notes for assault on Birgis.

Fett refuses to use villips and insists on keeping his own communications devices. I regret I must keep this infidel technology too, then.

I didn’t expect him and his mercenaries to accept them, I admit. And trying to use villips in isolation, without yorik-kul or vonduun, would be unsatisfactory anyway. The Mandalorians seem especially repelled by enslavement by the yorik-kul, which I find ironic for a race whose history is full of pillage, occupation, and slaughter. But slavery is something that seems to haunt them: it must have played a painful role in their own history. They obviously fear it.

They don’t fear death, though. They don’t embrace it, but they say that you live for as long as someone remembers your name. They never remove those helmets, so I can’t judge from their expressions, but the tone of their

voices tells me that the erasure of their culture by ours will be worse than death for them.

I suspect this is the key to keeping them loyal. Mandalore will remain untouched for as long as I need them. But enslavement will be the only way to handle them in the end.

Birgis: perimeter of spaceport, one standard week after invasion of Helska 4.

Beviin had to assume the Vongese knew what they were doing when it came to overrunning galaxies, but they didn't seem to care about stealth.

The main spaceport on Birgis—which served both civil and military vessels on this small planet—was the most obvious asset they could have targeted. From the observation point on the far perimeter, hidden in long grass, he could see the assault speeders patrolling the landing strips in a flurry of flashing lights. Others showed no lights at all but were detailed green targets in his night-vision visor. The military vessels and vehicles were an eclectic mix of the squadron based here and the remnants of others that had escaped the relentless invasion fleet and regrouped onsite.

Destroying those assets on the ground would be the hardest task Beviin could imagine. Playing the double agent was fine until you had to preserve the illusion by hitting your own side convincingly—lethally.

And the New Republic didn't even know yet that the Mandalorians were now their allies.

"I still say we should have hit the main civilian power station if they wanted a diversion," Cham muttered, propped on one elbow as he lay in the cover of the grass calibrating a portable missile-launcher. "Still, they're paying. Their call."

Fett tapped a pouch on his belt. "Good opportunity to hand over this data. Especially now that we've got our next two mission briefings on it. Something the New Republic can act on."

"There must be something I'm missing. The folk here won't exactly be in a teachable moment."

"You got a better idea for making contact with the New Republic with the Vong crawling all over us?"

"No, Mand'alor."

“So let’s go and look like a credible commando raid.” Fett gestured to take up positions. “Try not to kill everyone until we know if there’s an officer we can make contact with, and leave a fighter or two intact. Got that, everyone? Somebody has to escape this to pass on the data.”

Beviin kept one channel on his comlink on intercepted New Republic voice traffic. Of course, all right: they were expecting a Yuuzhan Vong landing of the kind that had breached the Outer Rim, massive aerial bombardments of magma and burning rock followed by troops spewed from what could only be described as gigantic worms. The psychological factor—vessels and weapons that looked like freakishly deformed organs—was hitting almost as hard as the sheer destructive power of the Vongese’s fleet.

He could hear the ops staff tasking early warning craft and fighters over five cities in the northern hemisphere, collating reports of enemy warships spotted—and bases on worlds toward the edge of the galaxy that had simply stopped responding to signals. The Yuuzhan Vong advance could be plotted by the wake of silent comm stations it left behind.

The personnel here certainly wouldn’t be expecting to find Mandalorians infiltrating their port and taking out the control hub, though.

Fett synchronized his chrono readout with the six of them and knelt back on his heels, occasionally tapping a control on his forearm plate. Dinua kept observation on the control tower. As she moved her head slowly, scanning, Beviin caught the green-lit tracking shot in the line of icons just to one side of his field of vision.

Briika had done a fine job of training the kid. The girl was in that awkward gap between becoming an adult at thirteen and a wife at sixteen, but she was certainly a completely competent soldier. Mando society had always been that way; but Beviin sometimes looked at aruetii kids of the same age and felt that thirteen was far too young to take on that kind of responsibility.

And if he’d told her so, he was sure she’d have slugged him without a second thought. She was as tough as her mother. He wondered what fate had befallen her father and decided to wait for her to tell him in her own time.

At least he’d been able to leave a message for Medrit. *Don’t worry. It’s not the way it looks. Sit tight.*

“Now remember,” said Fett. “I want to see good acting. Hit hard enough to look convincing, but don’t wipe everyone out because we need at least one survivor.” He paused and Beviin heard him swallow. “Thirty seconds.”

They counted down on the synchronized timer projected on their HUDs. At fifteen seconds Cham knelt on one knee and balanced the missile launcher on his right shoulder, pressing his cheek plate against the tube, left hand steadying the brace.

He had a habit of bobbing his head slightly as he counted but it never affected his aim. His head finally stopped bobbing for three seconds and a flare of yellow fire shot backward with a fweeesh of gas. Moments later the top of the spaceport tower exploded in a ball of white flame that climbed into the night sky, bringing instant and temporary daylight to the landing strip.

Fett didn’t need to say a word. As debris rained down and vehicles and personnel scattered, the Mandalorians began the hundred-meter sprint to the main building, each making their move a few seconds apart and taking different paths, while Cham kept the anti-aircraft battery distracted for a few moments with a wildly launched missile that punched through a water tower, sending a torrent smashing onto the canopies of parked speeders.

It was harder than it looked to feign an attack when your whole life had been about ruthlessly efficient killing. It was especially hard when the target really believed you wanted them dead and fought back with the strength of desperation. Beviin blew open a pair of security doors into the brightly lit main complex and followed Fett through with Briika and Dinua at his heels. Suvar and Tiroc covered the exit and a corridor leading off it to protect their escape route. They ran down the main passage to a pair of doors marked with POWER HAZARD signs.

Normally, it would have been the obvious place to enter and do as much damage as possible—the generator room. This time it wasn’t. Fett ran on and they reached an intersection in the corridor where they were met by blaster fire.

Beviin jumped back and took the opportunity to reload. “Good. Someone’s at home.”

“Now to get them to stop shooting long enough to explain we have an errand for them.” Fett and Briika leaned out of cover and laid down fire. Another volley of hot blue-white bolts skimmed the crown of Fett’s helmet,

adding another black streak to the green paint. "If they won't answer the door, we have to get in."

"We're good at that."

"Without killing them."

"Now there's the awkward bit." Beviin pulled a holo-probe out of his sleeve pocket and edged it cautiously around the angle of the wall. The image it relayed back to their HUDs showed a galley area: tables, stacks of metal trays, a couple of upended chairs, abandoned plates. People had scrambled. This had been a meal-break for aircrew, maybe. They'd have made a run to the airstrip to get the fighters airborne.

Someone was still there, though. He saw a flash of orange movement. Flight suit. Pilot. Pilots could get word out. Pilots needed not to be left too injured or stunned to fly out of here under Vong attack. "Bob'ika, let me reason with him."

"I can do that myself."

"Who's got durasteel armor, and who's got the beskar version? As in almost lightsaber-proof beskar?"

"If he gets a lucky shot in, that fancy antique won't save you."

"I never understood why you didn't go for beskar," said Beviin. "But save that for later. In three..."

Beviin jumped to his feet and ran for all he was worth towards the blaster fire. He had a detached moment of thinking that Medrit would go crazy at him for taking such a risk and worrying about that more than the bolt that hit him in the chest plate and sent searing hot air into the breather in his visor. Adrenaline was a wonderful thing. He thought that just as he threw himself on the flurry of orange-suited limbs and was deafened by his own voice yelling, "Drop it! Shut up and listen!"

Armor crashed against his. Dinua and Briika landed on top of him. He was almost at the bottom of a heavy pile subduing one pilot.

"Get off, we'll crush him—"

"Got his blaster?"

"I got it."

"Got his arms?"

The pilot yelped. Dinua had certainly grabbed something. That was a trick he hadn't seen used in quite a while. Beviin eased back and hauled the pilot into a sitting position to find he was in fact a she, an angry-looking

blonde with razored hair and now a welt on her right cheekbone that was turning into a black eye.

“Mandos,” she spat. “You’re fighting for those things? You filthy...”

“Yeah, we love you, too. Now listen to the Mandalore.” Beviin jerked her around to face Fett. “Where’s your helmet? You’ve got some flying to do.”

“Why?” There was a helmet on a nearby table, and it was going to fit her whether she liked it or not. “For you?”

“Get this data to your nearest command,” Fett said. He pulled the data chip from his belt and held it in her face, too close for her to focus. “You need this data on the Vong. Ship layout, some bio-data, and two mission plans that show where they’re headed next and their op orders. It’s whatever we could grab. Just get it to someone who’ll make good use of it. And we don’t have time to do the theatrical gaze of stunned silence. Shift it. Now.”

Fett helped her up and she zipped the chip into the pocket on the thigh of her suit, eyes wide and wary. “So whose side are you on?”

“Ours,” said Briika. “I want my daughter to have daughters. She won’t be doing that with the Vongese running the show.”

“Cham, get her to her fighter or whatever’s still flying, and see her past the Vong,” Fett said, indicating the exit with his blaster. “If there’s nothing airworthy on the strip, purge your Gladiator’s security data and give her the keys. I’ll buy you a new one.”

“Better make it look like we’re pursuing her, then.” Cham handed the pilot her helmet and pushed her ahead of him. “And I’ll be wanting a yellow one to match my plates this time. Custom job.”

There was nothing left to do now but get out. The crab-boys wouldn’t know if they’d been beaten back or not: the squad was only supposed to shut down the tower and cause a diversion anyway. They’d done that. Dinua set off at a sprint, rifle in both hands, and when they emerged from the building they saw why they hadn’t come across any resistance inside.

The Yuuzhan Vong ground forces were swarming toward the spaceport, with small craft that looked like disembodied organs flying over them. Facing them along the perimeter was a wall of shattered speeders, repulsor trucks, and anything that could be commandeered to provide a defensive barrier. Fleet personnel in a variety of uniforms—even catering corps—were taking position next to civilians, armed with a selection of weapons that smacked of desperation.

In the green images of Beviin's night visor, the clawed armor of the advancing Vongese warriors looked like a walking forest. There was nothing more he or his comrades could do. But fighting alongside those New Republic troops—yes, his gut not only wanted him to do that, it demanded that he did. But he turned away to follow the others back to their fighters and hated himself for it.

"And what happens when the New Republic praises its brave Mando allies for slipping intel to them?" he asked Fett. "It's going to happen. And 'oops' won't cut it with the Vong."

"Then I'll swallow my nausea, and payday with the Vong is over." Fett put his glove to his visor, and for a second Beviin thought he might actually take his helmet off. Instead he just wiped away a scrap of debris. "But we grab as many opportunities as we can to beat them. A day at a time."

"At least the New Republic can evacuate the next target before they show."

"Yes," Fett said. "Let's see what happens at New Holgha."

"When the crab-boys finally decide to remodel Mandalore, we'll be the last to know."

"That's what they'll think, too," said Fett. "Now let's see if Cham got that pilot away safely."

The pilot had, and they rendezvoused with Cham a few hours later. But Beviin couldn't stop himself checking the status of Birgis. He knew he shouldn't, but he had to find out.

He found out. There were no survivors.

Nom Anor: evaluation of the New Republic's reaction to the invasion.

I hadn't realized how much the New Republic despises the Mandalorians.

Their role in the attack on Birgis is known to the New Republic command, judging by a message we intercepted, and the infidel seem to find greater release in hating their own kind even than in hating us. They seem to think this is just another mercenary group, though. They don't know that Fett is leading them. That may be an extra psychological weapon I can exploit later.

Shirb system, Outer Rim: New Holgha, three standard months into the invasion.

The Five Holy Cities of New Holgha should have been evacuated by now, but it was clear that the New Republic hadn't acted on the warning, even though they'd denounced its source.

Could have been worse, Fett thought. *They could have lauded us as Republic heroes and spoiled the fun.*

With its long-range planetary defense radar sabotaged overnight, New Holgha became another world to fall to the Yuuzhan Vong almost without a struggle. Its troops had been diverted elsewhere, but Fett had the feeling that they would have made very little difference in the long run.

He watched the Yuuzhan Vong warship, another miit ro'ik type, as it moved across the shattered city skyline looking as if it was...feeding.

"Shab, it is," said Beviin, uncomfortably close to reading his thoughts. "It really is."

A giant dark-specked tube—at least double the length of the vessel—hung from the ship's hull and trawled through the city below, sucking up everything in its path. It reminded Fett of a tornado. He watched through his macrobinocular setting as it inhaled buildings, trees—and people. The more he watched, the less he could take in what he was seeing. In a galaxy full of bizarre ways to die, this was a whole new level of the grotesque.

"They're refueling." Beviin was transfixed. "The thing is actually digesting everything. Disgusting."

The Sarlacc parallels were strong. Fett had been convinced he'd shrugged off the nightmare of being digested alive. Now he wasn't so sure. But if he was appalled in any way by what he was watching, he suspected it was for himself and not for the New Holghans.

"The New Republic didn't believe us. Well, maybe they'll believe us now."

"They redeployed troops to defend Pedd Four," said Beviin. He had his helmet under one arm and rubbed his forehead with the back of his gauntlet. He looked tired, probably from spending too much time flying back and forth to Mandalore between missions, where he seemed to be making preparations for the worst scenario—that although the "crab-boys" he'd come quickly to hate had pledged to leave the sector alone, they were going to break their word sooner rather than later. "So they think we gave them misinformation."

Fett realized the New Republic didn't know as much about Mandalorians as it thought. It'd judged them wrong. "And they'll think a little bit of accurate intel was lobbed in for effect." He checked the charge level on his blaster. "I'll find a better way to convince them. I'm not giving up on the barves yet..."

"How long does it take to evacuate a planet anyway? Where do you put displaced worlds at a few weeks' notice?"

"I don't need you to make me feel better about it."

"Just saying it wouldn't have made much difference numerically if the Republic had believed the intel we gave them. Millions were still going to die either way."

Fett thought of the other information he'd handed over to the New Republic, the plans of the warship and analyses and samples of the random scraps of biological material he and Beviin had grabbed. The Republic could have been working on ways to counter the Yuuzhan Vong's organic technology. But they'd ignore it. He just knew they would.

"We keep handing it over until they get the message."

"As long as Pretty-Boy Nom doesn't catch on," Beviin said. "And sooner or later he's going to realize we ought to be more efficient and that there should be more of us."

Fett was still pondering a better way to pass intelligence to the New Republic when his comlink chirped.

"Infidel! This is Subaltern Bur'lorr. I need your assistance. I hunt a *Jeedai*."

"Jedi?" Fett ignored the warrior's jibe and clung to the one word he never thought would give him hope. "You sure about that?"

"He has a light weapon. He leapt from a high built-thing and was not harmed."

"Leave him to me," said Fett. "Jedi are my specialty. They killed my father."

Beviin shoved his helmet back on and adjusted his belt, scabbard and sheaths rattling. "Oya. Yes, indeed, oya..."

"I shall drive him toward you," said the subaltern. "His light weapon made no impression on my armor, which seemed to surprise him."

I'll bet. "Send me the coordinates."

"Have your troops cut him off. Our shapers want a live *Jeedai* to examine."

Fett relayed the coordinates to the rest of the squad and switched to the secure comlink channel. “We need him alive more than they do. A Jedi will be able to tell we’re not lying, and he can take the data back.”

“I’ve never seen a Jedi before,” said Dinua.

Beviin cut in, playing his father role. He seemed to like it. “He won’t be too pleased to see us, so don’t take any chances with his lightsaber.”

“What’s a Jedi doing here anyway?”

“He’s here. That’s good enough. Now let’s get to him before they do.”

The subaltern’s coordinates took them to a long road branching off what had been the main marketplace of the Five Cities. Large parts of it were now scoured down to the soil as if the buildings and trees had never been there, evidence that the dread weapon—as the Yuuzhan Vong called the warship’s scavenging tube—had passed this way. Fett’s penetrating radar and sensors picked up erratic movement and an organic target with human body temperature, moving in a row of bombed houses that were still smoking from the fires started by magma weapons.

“Okay, we can track him, but he can sense us, remember,” said Fett. He gestured the Detta brothers to the south end of the alley and Briika and Dinua to the broken roof overlooking it. “Beviin, go and stall the subaltern. Buy us some time. Tiroc, with me.”

The Jedi was in a section of alley about ten meters long that ran along the rear of the houses. Rubble had partly blocked it; Fett tracked him with his motion sensor almost to the end of the alley. Then the movement stopped.

“Briika?”

She patched her view of the scene through to Fett’s HUD. Judging by the angle, she was lying flat on the roof with her head hanging over into the alley. “See him? He’s in a bad way.”

The Jedi was a middle-aged, solidly square man in dark gray civilian pants and a battered blue jacket. He was slumped against a wall, eyes closed, face blackened and burned. Clutched in one hand was the hilt of a lightsaber.

Fett primed his jet pack and slipped a stun round into the dart thrower on his wrist. With any luck, the shock would be enough to subdue the Jedi without killing him. Fett needed the man to be fit enough to make it back to New Republic lines.

Fett hit the burner controls and soared over the scorched wall as the Jedi looked up and went for his weapon. For an injured man, his reflexes were

sobering: his lightsaber was humming a heartbeat before Fett dropped into the alleyway and fired the stun round. The projectile streaked past the Jedi's slashing lightsaber and stuck fast to his chest, sending a disruptive charge through his body. It dropped him instantly and the lightsaber fell to the ground, but he still struggled to reach for his weapon, fingers splayed, hand shaking uncontrollably.

"Don't push your luck," Fett said. He kicked the lightsaber hilt into the air with the spiked toecap of his boot and caught it one-handed. "I'm short of a green one for my collection."

The Jedi wasn't in any shape right then to use it anyway. Fett beckoned Cham over to give him first aid, but the Jedi tried to fight him off. It took Suvar and Tiroc to hold him down while Cham sprayed bacta over his face and hands. Gratitude wasn't his strong suit: he brought his knee up hard in Suvar's groin. Briika stepped in to subdue him with an armlock around his neck.

"Show some respect," she said, gritting her teeth. "The Mandalore's talking to you."

The Jedi's burned face managed a sneer. "So you're Boba Fett. And I didn't believe that Manda—"

"For once, I need a live Jedi," Fett interrupted. "You'll do. Cut the speech and listen up."

"Shoot me. You know what the Vong will do to me."

"I said shut up." Fett squatted over him. "We gave you a heads-up on this attack and Vong technology but your people ignored it. I'm offering again. Set up a secure message system and we'll supply the intel until our luck runs out."

Cham, still administering first aid, rammed a one-shot of painkiller into the man's exposed neck. Fett had to hand it to the Jedi. He didn't even flinch.

"You're slipping, Fett," he said hoarsely. "Feeding us misinformation is amateurish."

"I'm risking the life of every Mandalorian to get you this, barve-face." Fett was so exasperated that he pulled open the Jedi's jacket and stuffed the latest data chip into his belt. "Do your magic tricks. See what your precious Force tells you about our intentions. Now take it and run. We'll stall the Vong, but get it back to your intel people and don't blow our cover. We're

traitors, okay? As long as we're traitors, we can get intel. Keep your source secret."

The Jedi struggled to prop himself up on his elbow. His nose was millimeters from Fett's visor. Fett still didn't like Jedi, not even real soldiers like this one. "But you're crippling us. You're killing people. Why not just fight?"

"Because the mindlessly heroic last stand is great for holovids but it's not how wars work." Fett hauled the Jedi to his feet. He was a solid man, vividly gray-haired in the way of those who'd once had jet-black curls. Fett pressed the lightsaber into his hand; the hilt seemed dwarfed by it. "The crabs have to believe we're serious. A few lives against the whole galaxy, including keeping them away from the Mandalore sector. Do the math."

The Jedi stared at his weapon. "You finally grew a conscience?"

"No. I took the job of protecting Mandalore, and a contract is a contract. There's no future for any of us if the Vong take over."

"I never—"

"No speeches. Move it. We'll get you past the Vong."

Tiroc nudged him. "Crab approaching, Mand'alor. Check your HUD."

"I see him. Got a vessel, Jedi?"

"That's where I was headed."

"Tiroc, see he gets to it and escort him out of the sector."

The Jedi stopped dead in the narrow exit from the alley, almost jamming Tiroc in it. He turned his head to Fett.

"Kubariet," he said. "I'm a Jedi Knight. Kubariet. Only the one name." Then Tiroc shoved him in the back and they were gone.

So far, so good. But it couldn't last, and it didn't. In the next breath Beviin came in through the rubble-strewn breach in the wall with exaggerated slowness, a custom Merr-Sonn heavy blaster in one fist and the Yuuzhan Vong subaltern on his heels. The creature pushed past Beviin and one of the claws protruding from his armor caught his shoulder plate, scoring a line in the blue paint.

It could have ripped Beviin open like a canister. But his armor was forged from beskar, real Mandalorian iron that even Yuuzhan Vong weapons might not penetrate. He reached into his belt and drew his ancient beskad, a short razor-edged saber forged from the same iron as his armor.

This is going to get ugly fast. There'd be a body, and he'd have to hide it. Fett's linked icons showed that Cham and the two women had made the same call and started powering their armor-mounted weapons.

"Where is the Jedi?" the warrior demanded. His head weaved from side to side and his amphistaff writhed along his forearm. "He ran in here. I tracked him here."

"Not here, friend." Briika stepped between him and Dinua. "Want us to go look for him?"

"What have you done with him? Tell me!"

The warrior wheeled around and nearly hit Beviin with his claw-spiked arm again. The bounty hunter slid his blaster casually into its holster and clasped the leather-wrapped hilt of the beskad.

"Careful, now," he said. "You could have someone's eye out with that thing."

Villips weren't like comlinks that needed opening and operating. Villips were like being there in person, always on, always watching. The warrior had to be silenced, and fast.

Fett didn't even have to give the signal.

Beviin went for the villip hooked on the warrior's shoulder and sliced it across its base with a single sweep, sending it flopping to the ground in a spray of fluid. For a split second the warrior just stared, jaws parted—his lipless mouth seemed permanently open—and then the narrow alley plunged into bedlam.

"Trait—"

It was the last word the warrior said. The living armor shifted before their eyes to protect his neck and head, but Beviin managed to hit him in the jaw with his return swing, and a beskad was a heavy weapon. The blade embedded itself in the warrior's jaw, leaving him gurgling and thrashing as his amphistaff changed briefly from snake to iron bar. As the warrior dropped to his knees, the amphistaff slipped free and Fett threw himself on it instinctively, punching his glove-mounted vibroblade through it and pinning it to the ground. Its tail thrashed. Suvar rushed over to decapitate it with his own blade.

It was a couple of seconds that felt like hours. The subaltern was still screaming and writhing as Beviin struggled to pull his saber free. Briika leapt on the warrior between the scythe-like claws to drive her vibroblade deep

into him but it skidded off the Vonduun crab armor. She let out a grunt and stabbed again. And still he kept struggling.

“Shut him up for fierfek’s sake—”

“Shabla claws. Look out.”

Beviin let go of the saber and grabbed the warrior’s armored throat with his crushgaunts.

“Let’s play a game, shabuir.” He squeezed, and the subaltern’s eyes stared. His mouth opened wide. “It’s called beskar beats crab-shell.”

Crushgaunts had been illegal for centuries. The micronized beskar in them meant they could exert enough pressure to shatter thick bone and maybe more. The shell armor seemed to be putting up a fight, but Beviin—a mild man most of the time, in Fett’s experience—hung on, cursing in completely incomprehensible Mando’a, until there was a sound like cracking ice and the warrior let out a long gurgle. The armor twitched, its claws snapping impotently a couple of times before stopping.

A second’s silence followed.

Beviin, slightly breathless, gazed at his gloves with a distracted smile. “We were crazy to ban these.”

“Remind me to rescind that when I get back,” Fett said.

It was a good thing that nearby cannon barrage had drowned the screams. Beviin struggled to pull the saber out of the body and finally had to put his boot square on the warrior’s chest to do it.

“So the armor dies when the soldier does?” Suvar grabbed the dead amphistaff, sliced chunks off the subaltern and his armor, and stuffed the remains into his pouches and pockets until they bulged. “Bio samples, not trophies, okay? We need to get as much information on these...things as we can.”

Beviin reached over and sliced off some scalp complete with wispy black hair. “Trophy. Now let’s go, shall we?”

It took five Mandos to tackle one Yuuzhan Vong this time. But they’d learned a lot about how to kill them in just that one brief tussle. They’d learn plenty more.

Briika scrambled to her feet, a little unsteady. The explosions were getting closer. “All we have to do is start up a crushgaunt factory. Easy. I mean...oh...”

She seemed breathless. She looked down at herself, and then sank to her knees again, hands pressed against her chest plate.

“Buir? Buir!” Dinua grabbed her mother’s shoulders and as her arms dropped the dark blood welling from under the armor plate was suddenly visible. It was pooling between her knees. It was all over the dead subaltern. “She’s been stabbed. The crab armor spike went right through her suit. Get her plates off!”

“No, that might be holding her together,” Cham said. “Get her back to Slave I, fast.”

“She’s bleeding out—”

Beviin picked her up in his arms with no apparent effort.

“You promised...” she said.

Fett was about to say something brutally pragmatic but he was wrong, and he knew it. “Faster if we both lift her with jet packs.”

“That’ll take some doing.”

“Do it. Dinua, burn that body. If the Vong find him they’ll know it wasn’t a lightsaber that sliced him up.”

Dinua looked close to protest. But she simply nodded and adjusted the flamethrower on her wrist, then looked back at her mother.

“K’oyacyi, Buir.” *Hang in there, Mama.*

It was one thing carrying a wounded comrade between two—Fett couldn’t recall ever doing that, of course—but maneuvering a jet pack in addition was hard. He thought she’d die before they touched down: she kept repeating “You promised...” ever more weakly, and when they reached Slave I, she was barely conscious.

Beviin eased off her helmet while Fett activated the emergency med droid that he kept and had never needed to use. The unit, a round-ended cylinder the length of his arm, darted around her like an insect, attaching sensors.

“Transfusion needed,” it announced. “Hypovolemic shock. Stabilize, tie off blood vessels in—”

“Transfuse, then, you hut’uun,” said Beviin. Droids had no bedside manner. “I got you, Briika, it’s okay. You’re fine.”

“You promised,” she said, suddenly very lucid. “Dinua. Gai bal manda.”

“I did,” he said. He took off his helmet. “I swear. Don’t you worry about that. K’oyacyi. Hang in there.”

The med droid slipped catheters into Briika’s arm and neck, and Beviin kept looking to the hatch as if willing Dinua to show up. Fett reflected on the variable nature of penetrating wounds, and how unreliable stabbing was

as a method of stopping an enemy. Beviin stood by the hatch, blinking rapidly and occasionally shaking his head as if arguing with himself.

The med droid started bleeping.

“No pulse,” it said. “Unable to resuscitate.”

It hadn’t even started the incision. Beviin didn’t say a word; he simply pushed himself away from the hatch to begin cleaning up the blood that was drying in dark patches on Slave I’s scrupulously clean deck. Dinua arrived at a run, boots clattering in the hatchway, a matter of minutes too late.

“Dinua...” Beviin always kept his word. He caught her by the arm before she got to the body. “Ni kyr’tayl gai sa’ad.” He glanced briefly at Fett, and the translation was for him, not her. “I know your name as my child.”

He didn’t have to say that her mother was dead or that he was sorry. The instant adoption told the girl all she needed to know.

Dinua held her helmet upside down in both hands and gazed into it, eyes fixed and glassy, as if frozen in the act of putting it on. And Fett could suddenly feel hard metal in his own hands: crouched in the shadows, bone-dry red dust stinging his eyes, staring at a silver-and-blue helmet and both utterly destroyed and totally numb at realizing his father was gone forever. He knew better than anyone how she felt, and for a brief moment he experienced a rare connection.

“It’s okay to cry,” Beviin said quietly. “We all cry sooner or later. I have, that’s for sure.”

He was talking to Dinua, but it still made Fett start. She sniffed loudly and flipped the helmet upright between spread fingers.

“I’m ready,” she said.

“That’s my girl.”

There were no orphans in Mandalorian society—not for long, anyway.

Except me. Fett was fine with that. Nobody could ever replace his father. It was better that they didn’t try.

Nom Anor: observations.

The Mandalorians are just like any other infidel, it seems. They are as weak and corrupt; they traded their entire galaxy for a few years of immunity for their wretched little sector. In a way, I’m...disappointed. I had higher hopes of them.

A few years? Perhaps less than that. Perhaps a few months.

I had expected them to be better warriors, I admit. Their reputation for savagery has been exaggerated from what I've seen of them in this war. But they still remain very useful for intelligence gathering and sabotage, and I shall keep them very much undercover even from our own warriors. They think their culture is eternal, but they'll be erased when I have no further use for them. The more I look at them, the more weakness I see.

Aarmor. Iron armor. Lifeless shells.

How... weak.

Slave I: crossing Mandalore sector, two standard weeks later.

Fett was impressed by the ability of the average Mando to keep his mouth shut and close ranks even without being asked.

The regular overnight intelligence summary transmitted to Slave I recorded two contacts between Mandalorian vessels and the New Republic, where noncombatant Mandos were treated as hostiles just as Fett needed them to be. Both pilots obliged in keeping up appearances by returning fire and in one case destroying the New Republic fighter.

"Carry on hating us," Fett said aloud. "Now we'll keep the intel we get and use it ourselves."

Mandalorian engineers were already working on developing enhanced weapons specifically for use against the Yuuzhan Vong. Word had spread within the Mando community about the real nature of the deal with the invaders, but that was as far as it got. Nobody else's business, of course: outsiders wouldn't understand anyway. Aruetiise. He saw no reason to learn the language, but the odd word was useful.

The invaders continued their advance across the galaxy, albeit more slowly than he expected. If—when—they turned on the Mandalore sector, he'd be ready for them.

Until the next call, or the next opportunity to gather information, he opted to remain the Boba Fett that everyone expected him to be, more bounty hunter than Mandalore, because life still went on where the Yuuzhan Vong hadn't yet reached.

Fools. Life won't be going on much longer.

Some of the Mandalorian clans told him they planned to dig in and resist the Yuuzhan Vong, and some planned to do something called ba'slan shev'la, which Beviin translated as "strategic disappearance." It was hard to

wipe out a people who could vanish for years and then show up again as an avenging army, all without the guiding hand of a conventional government.

Yes, they'll show up again. Don't doubt it.

Fett respected their ability to sort out their own affairs. He was contemplating the nature of identity, with one eye on the movement of share prices displayed on the console, when Slave I picked up a vessel on an intercept course.

It was a New Republic X-wing, just like old times. For once, this one wasn't in his database, like every other individual ship catalogued by thermal signature, electromagnetic profile, and other telltale characteristics that helped him identify it. It was genuinely unknown. He didn't have its pilot on his list.

And it meant business, judging by the speed it was approaching. He monitored Slave I's automatic defense system and decelerated to watch its reaction on the scan. When it came within a thousand kilometers, it slowed and Slave I's comm beeped for attention, displaying the source and router.

Ah. The message was coming via one of the nodes he'd listed on the intelligence datachip. Fett opened the link.

"Target practice, or do you want to talk?" he asked.

The voice didn't surprise him. He'd never admit that it relieved him, though.

"It's Kubariet," said the pilot. "I'd never fire on an ally."

"Think of yourself as my enemy's enemy."

"Close enough for me. Rendezvous point?"

"Go about and follow me into Vorpa'ya."

"Concord Dawn's closer."

"I can't return there. And you don't need to know why."

"That's okay, Fett, because I already do. I work with New Republic Intelligence."

"And you still found your way here. Impressive."

The Jedi didn't laugh; they never did. But he followed Fett.

Vorpa'ya was a dump. There was no other accurate description. Nerf farming and bad land management had left it as a Tatooine waiting to happen. The two vessels landed at a careful distance on an overgrazed plain that threw up clouds of gritty dust, and Fett waited for Kubariet to open his canopy and jump out. When he did, he wasn't in Jedi robes but a regular pilot's flight suit.

"It's a deal," said Kubariet.

Fett couldn't recall any Jedi who talked like that. "About time."

"It was useful information. I'm sorry we didn't crack on to that right away."

"Fine."

"So, what's your fee?"

"I don't want your credits. Just kill more Vong."

Kubariet looked studiously blank. "My apologies. But now we can at least keep the fleet off your back and put them in the picture."

"No."

"But—"

"Every time we meet the New Republic, we'll remind them we fight for the Vong. It has to be that way for this game to work."

"But you're fighting two wars at once. Fighting for the New Republic and defending yourself against us, too."

"We'll manage okay."

"Too proud to admit you're our ally?"

"No, wary of leaks in your organization that might blow our cover. Nom Anor's been right here for eighteen years and we never spotted him." Fett decided he could do business with this Jedi at least. "And we're not on your side. We're on our side. The longer the Vong think I'm their pal, the more time I buy for Mandalore."

"They'll come for you in the end."

"I know that."

"Then you'll have to show your hand."

"I know that, too, and if and when that happens, we'll show them what Mandos can really do. It'll be a nice surprise for them. They'll hardly recognize us."

The we slipped out. For a moment Fett wondered about all the times he used I and the very few occasions when he said we, and accepted that he now felt a communal sense of responsibility for Mandalore and whoever passed for Mandalorian.

"Can I ask you to consider something, Fett?"

"It's free, but make it quick."

"Your father did something once that you might be able to do for us today."

Spare me the amateur psy ops. "What?"

“He recruited a group of training sergeants for the Old Republic’s commando forces—the Cuy’val Dar. Maybe we could use some of your experienced commandos to train planetary militias to fight the Yuuzhan Vong.”

Fett recalled the Cuy’val Dar, all right: he’d grown up surrounded by them on Kamino. “The multiplier effect.” He paused a beat. It was a good idea, but he didn’t want to look too enthusiastic. “I’ll see who’s interested.”

Kubariet reached inside his suit and took out a datachip. “Use this to configure secure links from your comlink system to mine. I’m your portal, so to speak. Nobody knows this comes from you.”

“Let’s swap. I’ve got a bag of Vong spare parts in the conservator if you need them.”

“I’ve take whatever you’ve got.” Kubariet seemed on the brink of grabbing Fett’s hand, or slapping his shoulder, or some other display of comradeship that made Fett recoil. Kubariet wasn’t giving up on redemption, though, spymaster or not. “Fett, don’t you care that people despise you all as traitors? Can you really swallow it when the New Republic tries to kill you when you’re risking your necks for us?”

Fett tried to recall what it felt like to be a hero but nothing came to mind. He couldn’t speak for his troops or the clans in general, but no, he lost no sleep over it. He had his own code of honor: and abiding by it meant he could live not only with himself, but also with his father’s still-present scrutiny.

“We’ll survive,” he said.

“If you think of something I can do to make your lives easier, you’ll let me know, won’t you?”

Fett couldn’t think of anything that the New Republic could give Mandalore other than a wide berth when the war was over. He turned to walk back to Slave I and retrieve the samples. The irony of the Jedi’s offer wasn’t lost on him, but now was the time to keep a lifetime’s hatred on a leash and do the pragmatic, practical thing—to behave as Jango Fett would have.

Get the job done. Don’t give in to emotion.

Fett could no longer think of a single thing that another person could possibly give him.

Maybe that was the point. He turned on one heel.

“Jedi, there’s one thing you can do.”

“Okay. Name it.”

“Make sure everyone knows that a Mandalorian called Briika Jeban died to save a citizen of the New Republic.”

“Of course. Who was she? Can you tell me any more? Who did she save?”

Fett tilted his head slightly to one side, then resumed his walk to his ship.

“You, Jedi,” he said. “You.”

JAINA SOLO RECORDING

Jedi vs. Sith: The Essential Guide to the Force

25 ABY: This recording takes place after the events
of *Vector Prime*.

There are still people on Dubrillion, but it's possible that they've already been overwhelmed by the invaders. The entire planet may be lost to us. Yet something happened during the evacuation that does give me some hope, a power that Anakin somehow discovered I believe every Jedi should know about this.

After we realized the invaders had targeted Dubrillion, everything happened pretty fast. Anakin, Jacen, and I were piloting Lando's TIE fighters, flying surface patrol and doing our best to keep incoming ships away from friendlies. My tracking screen was already glowing red from the sheer number of enemy fighters when they destroyed Belt-Runner I, which had been providing our only shielding power. There were just too many of them to fight. I ordered Anakin and Jacen to break back to Dubrillion, but Anakin disagreed, and instructed us to follow him into the asteroid belt called Lando's Folly. The enemy pursued us.

It's hard to explain what happened, but Anakin connected with me and Jacen, and then we all linked together. Using telepathy, Anakin said, Join with me. Three as one. Within seconds, it was as if we'd found communion, a telepathic joining and bond. Each of us flew with the added perspectives of, well, of each other. I can only describe it as suddenly having extra eyes and extra perceptions as we all gave in to the Force. Our reactions were transformed into anticipation.

Anakin was the focal point of our symbiosis. We became the perfect squadron, joined in thought and purpose. We weaved through the asteroids and destroyed one enemy fighter after the next. They couldn't keep up with us, at least not until Anakin became overwhelmed and nearly lost consciousness.

I don't think this meld that we experienced was a fluke. If enough Jedi can learn to embrace the Force together as my brothers and I did, I believe this power might be our best weapon against the invaders.

RECOVERY

Troy Denning

26 ABY: This story takes place after the events of
Balance Point.

Chapter 1

Outside the medcenter viewport, a ragged crescent of white twinkles known as the Drall's Hat drooped across the violet sky, its lower tip slashing through the Ronto to touch a red star named the Eye of the Pirate. The constellations above Corellia had not changed since Han Solo was a child, when he had spent his nights contemplating the galactic depths and dreaming of life as a starship captain. He had believed then that stars never changed, that they always kept the same company and migrated each year across the same slice of sky. Now he knew better. Like everything in the galaxy, stars were born, grew old, and died. They swelled into red giants or withered into white dwarfs, exploded into novas and supernovas, vanished into black holes.

All too often, they changed hands.

It had been nearly three weeks since the fall of the Duro system, and Han still found it hard to believe that the Yuuzhan Vong had a stronghold in the Core. From there, the invaders could strike at Commenor, Balmorra, Kuat, and—first in line—Corellia. Even Coruscant was no longer safe, lying as it did at the opposite end of the Corellian Trade Spine.

Harder to accept than Duro's loss—though easier to believe—was the enthusiasm with which the cowards of the galaxy had embraced the enemy's offer of peace in exchange for Jedi. Already a lynch mob on Ando had killed Dorsk 82, and on Cujicor the Peace Brigade had captured Swilja Fenn. Han's own son Jacen was the most hunted Jedi in the galaxy, and his wife and other children, Anakin and Jaina, were sought almost as eagerly. If it were up to him, the Jedi would leave the collaborators to their fate and go

find a safe refuge somewhere in the Unknown Regions. But the decision was not his, and Luke Skywalker was not listening.

A raspy murmur sounded from the lift station, shattering the electronic silence of the monitoring post outside Leia's door. Han opaqued the transparisteel viewport, then stepped around the bed where his wife lay in a therapeutic coma, her eyelids rimmed by purple circles and her flesh as pallid as wampa fur. Though he had been assured Leia would survive, his heart still ached whenever he looked at her. He had almost lost her during the fall of Duro, and a stubborn series of necrotic infections continued to threaten her mangled legs. Even more in doubt was their future together. She had greeted him warmly enough after they found each other again, but Chewbacca's death had changed too much for their marriage to continue as before. Han felt brittle now, older and less sure of his place in the galaxy. And in the few hours she had been coherent enough to talk, Leia had seemed hesitant, more tentative and reluctant to speak her mind around him.

At the door, Han peered out of the darkened room to find four human orderlies outside flanking the MD droid at the monitoring post. Though they had a covered repulsor gurney and fresh white scrubs, they were not wearing the masks and sterile gloves standard for visitors to the isolation ward.

"... don't look like orderlies to me," the MD droid was saying. "Your fingernails are absolute bacterial beds."

"We've been cleaning disposal chutes," said the group's leader, a slash-eyed woman with black hair and the jagged snarl of a hungry rancor. "But don't worry, we came through decon."

As she spoke, one of the men with her was sliding across the counter behind the droid. Han drew back into the room and retrieved his blaster from a satchel beneath Leia's bed. Though he had been dreading this moment for three weeks, now that it had come, he felt almost relieved. The enemy had not arrived when he was sleeping or out of the room, and there were only four.

Han returned to the door to find the MD droid standing with darkened photoreceptors, his vocabulator slumped against his chest. The orderly behind the counter was scowling down at the data display.

"Don't see her on the register, Roxi," he said to the woman.

"Of course not," Roxi growled. "Slug, do you think a Jedi would use her own name? Look for a human female with amphistaff wounds."

Slug, a moonfaced man with a bald head and a week's worth of stubble on his face, scrolled down the screen and began to read symptoms off the display. "Parietal swelling . . . thoracic lacerations . . . double severed sartorius . . ." He stopped and looked up. "You understand this stuff?"

Roxi glared at the man as though the question were a challenge, then asked, "What was that second one?"

Slug glanced back at the display. "Thoracic lacerations?"

"That could be it." Roxi glanced at her other companions and, seeing that they had no better idea what thoracic meant than she did, continued, "Well, lacerations sounds right. What room?"

Slug gave her the number, and the four impostors started down the opposite corridor. Han allowed them a few moments to clear the area, then slipped into the monitoring post and used the controls to seal his wife's room with a quarantine code. The thought of leaving her alone made his stomach queasy, but he had to handle this problem quietly and by himself. Though a Jedi-friendly doctor had admitted Leia under a false name and Han had sent the famous Solo children home with Luke and Mara, the alias would not withstand a CorSec incident investigation. And with a new Yuuzhan Vong base rising at the edge of the sector, no one associated with the Jedi would dare trust Corellia's always erratic government for protection. Had Leia's condition not forced them to divert soon after escaping Duro, this was the last place Han would have stopped.

He peered around the corner of the monitoring post and, in the night-shift twilight, saw the impostors disappearing into a bacta tank parlor about halfway down the corridor. Taking a datapad from the recharger on the counter and a breath mask, hygienic cap, gloves, and lab coat from the supply locker, he did his best to disguise himself as someone official and followed.

The intruders were gathered around tank number three in the parlor's far corner, studying a slender human with a trio of freshly stitched lacerations angling down across her chest. Like Leia's wounds, the cuts were atypically inflamed and almost black at the edges, a sign that some toxin was proving a challenge for the bacta. The only other occupied tank contained a Selonian female whose severed tail stump was covered by a graft of unfurred hide.

"The contract said she'd shaved her head," Roxi complained, staring at the long hair of the patient in tank three. "Even in bacta, I don't think it would grow back this fast."

"Maybe not, but they are amphistaff cuts," Slug said. He was standing next to a deactivated attendant droid, reading from a data display. "And no one's saying how she got them."

Roxi lifted her brow and thought for a moment, then said, "We'd better bring her along. Start the tank draining. We'll pick her up after we've checked the other rooms."

Han drew back and tucked the blaster under his lab coat, then made sure his breath mask was secure and waited. When he heard the impostors coming, he turned the corner with the datapad before him. He ran headlong into the burliest of the impostors and was nearly knocked off his feet.

"Uh, sorry," Han said, looking up. "Entirely my . . ." He let the sentence dangle off, then gasped, "You're not wearing a breather!"

The burly impostor frowned. "What breather?"

"Your safety mask." Han tapped the breath mask on his face, then looked from one impostor to the other. "None of you are. Didn't you check the hazard indicator?"

"Hazard indicator?" Roxi asked, pushing her way to the front. "I didn't see any indicator."

"In the decontamination lock," Han said. "Red means no entry. Orange means full biosuit. Yellow means breath masks and gloves. The light was yellow. We've had a leuma outbreak."

"Leuma?" Slug asked.

"You'll be all right," Han said, striking just the right note of insincere reassurance. He waved Roxi toward the monitoring post. "But we've got to get you some breath masks. Then you'll need inoculations—"

Roxi made no move to leave the bacta parlor. "I've never heard of any disease called leuma."

"Airborne virus," Han said. "A new one—or maybe it's a spore. We really don't know yet, but there's talk of it being a Yuuzhan Vong weapon."

That was enough to bring Slug and the burly impostor out into the corridor.

"Hold up, you two!" Roxi snapped.

The pair stopped, then Slug frowned and said, "But we need those breath masks."

"And soon," Han pressed, turning his attention to Slug. "You can still be saved, but the chances are going down with every breath you take."

Three of the impostors—the three men—clamped their mouths shut. Roxi only glared at Han.

“You know this how?” She stepped into the door and stood nose-to-chin with him. “Because you’re a doctor?”

Han’s stomach sank. “That’s right.” He had to resist an urge to check his appearance. “Senior xenoepidemiologist, to be exact.” He pretended to scrutinize her white scrubs. “And you are?”

“Wondering why the senior xenoepidemiologist would make his rounds in patient slippers.” Roxi glanced at his feet. “Without socks.”

She flexed her fingers, and a hold-out blaster dropped out of a sleeve holster. Han cursed and brought the datapad down on her wrist. Her weapon clattered to the floor, and he kicked it away, then retreated, fumbling for his own blaster. Roxi withdrew into the parlor, shrieking orders and pushing her companions at the door. Only Slug went. He ignored Han and ran up the corridor.

“Slug!” Roxi screamed.

“M-masks!” Slug called. “Gotta get—”

Han found his blaster and planted a stun bolt between Slug’s shoulder blades. The impostor thumped to the floor.

Weapon flashes sprayed from the bacta parlor. Han dived behind a low half wall in the small waiting area opposite. His attackers continued to fire, and the thin plasteel started to smoke and disintegrate. He thumbed his own power to high, then stuck the blaster through a melt hole and returned fire.

The bolt storm quieted. Han dropped to his belly and peered around the corner. The impostors were nowhere to be seen, but their repulsor gurney remained at the back of the parlor. The woman in tank three had opened her eyes and was looking around. Considering that she was caught in the middle of a firefight, her expression seemed surprisingly calm. Maybe she was too sedated to comprehend what was happening. Han hoped so. If she didn’t use the microphone in her breathing mask to call for help, there was still a chance—a slim chance—that he could take care of this without CorSec connecting the incident to Leia’s room.

The woman’s gaze shifted, then Roxi’s voice cried, “Go!”

The male impostors leaped into view and began to lay suppression fire. Han burned a hole through one man’s chest. Roxi pulled something long from beneath the gurney sheet, and when Han switched targets, she took

cover behind tank three. He stopped firing. The woman in the bacta seemed to smile her thanks.

“On two, Dex,” Roxi called. “One—”

Roxi stepped into view, and “two” was lost to the shrieking cacophony of the repeating blaster in her hands. Han concentrated fire on her. A faint hiss sounded somewhere deep in the parlor, and Dex’s blaster fell quiet.

Roxi’s bolts stitched their way across the floor toward Han’s head. He drew back and popped up in the corner, blaster trained on the parlor entrance. She poured fire into the corridor, but stayed out of sight until she appeared at the door and began to chew through his flimsy cover.

Han fired back, but to little effect. There was no sign of Dex, and that worried him, too. Seeing that his angle was hopeless, he stopped firing and looked to the back of the parlor.

“Now!” he yelled.

Nothing happened, except that Roxi glanced away long enough for Han to hurl himself across the waiting room. She adjusted her aim and began to burn more holes through the half wall. Han returned fire. Now that his angle was better, at least he was making her cringe.

Then the repulsor gurney glided into view, moving sideways, no one pushing. Han’s jaw must have dropped. Roxi sneered, shook her head, and, not one to be fooled twice, nearly burned his head off.

The gurney caught her in the hip. Her weapon stitched craters across the ceiling, and she stumbled into the doorway. Han blasted her chest and shoulder, spinning her around so that she fell over the gurney. The repeating blaster clattered to the floor inside the bacta parlor, where Dex could get at it. Cursing his luck, Han poured fire through the door and charged.

Dex lay dead between tanks one and two, the last wisps of smoke rising from a round hole in his chest. It was too small and perfect to be a blaster wound, at least an ordinary one. Han glanced around the room, searching for the source of his mysterious help.

The woman in tank three was watching him.

“You?” he asked.

The gurney moved again—it might have been settling on its repulsor, but Han didn’t think so.

Out by the monitoring station, the decontamination lock hissed open, and the sound of booted feet began to rumble down the corridor. Han ignored the clamor and gestured at the impostor on the floor.

“Him, too?”

The woman’s eyes fluttered closed, opened again, then fell shut and remained that way.

“Okay—must have been a ricochet.” Han was not sure he believed that, but it was what he intended to tell the CorSec investigators. “I owe you— whoever you are.”

Then the security squad was rushing down the corridor, yelling at Han to drop his weapon and hit the floor. He placed his blaster on the gurney and turned to find a pair of ruddy-cheeked boys poking Imperial-era blaster rifles in his face.

“Hey, take it easy.” Han reluctantly raised his hands. “I can explain.”

Chapter 2

Temples aching, world spinning, stomach . . . churning. Leia returned. Someone yelling. Han, of course.

Head pounding.

Quiet!

Han continued to yell, and someone snapped back. Leia opened her eyes and found herself staring into a sun. Which one, she did not know, but it was blinding and blue, and it moved from one eye to the other.

A gentle voice—a man’s—said she was coming to. To what?

There were silhouettes around her. A man standing at her side, the blue disk of a headlamp affixed to his brow. A woman behind a tray of medical instruments. Han and someone in a bulky jumpsuit still arguing over by the viewport. Another man by the closet in the corner of the room, turned half away, pawing through a shape Leia recognized as her travel satchel.

“Oo thurr . . .” Even to Leia, the words were weak and incoherent. “Thopp.”

“It’s okay, Leia,” said the man with the headlamp. “I’m Dr. Nimbi. You’ll feel better soon.”

“I thel fie.” Leia tried to point, but her arm felt as heavy as a durasteel beam. “Thopp thath theet.”

The headlamp went out, revealing a gray-eyed face with laugh lines and a familiar smile. “Better?”

Leia could see now that the man wore a doctor’s lab coat with jasper nimbi embroidered on the lapel. His assistant, a plump woman old enough to be the doctor’s mother, was dressed in a well-worn nurse’s uniform. The

man poking through her satchel had the patches of a Corellian Security agent on his jumpsuit, as did the officer with whom Han was arguing.

“... released him?” Han was demanding. “He’s a killer!”

“The only deaths here are the ones you caused, Solo,” the officer replied. “And his identification has been confirmed as authentic. If we need to question Gad Sluggins again, we’ll know where to find him.”

“So would I,” Han retorted. “In the nearest Peace Brigade safehouse.”

“Political affiliations are no longer a crime on Corellia, Solo.”

In the corner, the agent at the closet removed a datapad from Leia’s satchel, glanced around at the others in the room, then slipped it into his jumpsuit pocket. Leia tried again to point. This time, the effort ended in a metallic clatter as her arm, strapped in place and connected to a tangle of intravenous drip lines, rattled the bed’s safety rail. She settled for lifting her head to glare in the thief’s direction.

“Shtop.” The word was almost recognizable. “Thief!”

Han immediately stopped arguing with the CorSec officer and came to her side. With hollow cheeks and bags under his eyes, he looked exhausted.

“You’re awake,” he said, perhaps overstating the case. “How do you feel?”

“Terrible,” Leia said. Everything ached, and it felt like she had a hot power-feed around her legs. “That agent is stealing.”

She extended a finger toward the culprit, but the man’s officer had stepped to the foot of the bed, and it looked like she was pointing at him. Han and the others exchanged glances and appeared concerned.

“Pharmaceutical illusion,” Dr. Nimbi said. “Her perceptions will clear within the hour.”

“I am not having delusions.” Leia continued to shake her finger toward the unseen closet. “The other one. Going through my bag.”

The officer pivoted around to look, exposing the now closed closet and an innocent-looking subordinate.

Han squeezed her shoulder. “Forget it, Leia. We’ve got more important things to worry about than someone digging through your underwear.”

“She doesn’t need to hear that now, Han,” the doctor said. He turned back to Leia with a comforting smile. “How do the legs feel? Any better?”

Leia ignored the question and demanded, “What things, Han?”

Han seemed baffled. He glanced at Dr. Nimbi, then said, “Nothing I can’t handle. Don’t worry.”

“When you tell me not to worry, that’s when I worry,” Leia said. Han had always been one of those men who navigated life more by instinct than by chart—it was one of the things she most loved about him—but his instincts since Chewbacca’s death had been carrying him into some very dangerous areas. Or perhaps the territory only seemed dangerous, lying as it did always farther from Leia. “What’s wrong?”

Han still seemed worried, but at least he had the sense to ignore Dr. Nimbi’s admonishing shake of the head. “Well,” he began, “you do remember where we are?”

Leia glanced at the emblems on the CorSec officer’s jumpsuit. “How could I forget?”

And then it hit her. The Corellians were calling them by their correct names. There were two CorSec agents standing in her hospital room, and Dr. Nimbi—a Jedi sympathizer with enough experience in such matters not to slip—was calling Leia by her real name. Their cover had been blown.

Something started to beep on the equipment behind the bed.

Dr. Nimbi held a scanner over Leia’s heart. “Leia, you need to calm yourself. Stress only reduces the chance of your body overcoming the infection.”

The beeping continued, and the nurse took a spray hypo off her tray. “Shall I prepare a—”

“That won’t be necessary.” Leia reached out with the Force and nudged the hypo—clumsily, but enough to make her point. “Clear?”

The astonished nurse dropped the hypo on the tray and huffed something about pushy Jedi witches, then raised her nose and started for the door—where she was met by a rising din of excited voices. The MD droid was threatening to notify security and protesting that the media were not permitted in the isolation ward, but the intruders were paying no attention. A sudden glow poured through the door as a holocrew’s lights illuminated the corridor outside, and the flustered nurse came stumbling back into the room.

“Great,” Han muttered. “Thrackan.”

A bearded man who—except for his gray hair—looked more like Han than Han did came bursting into the room, leaving a small swarm of assistants and holojournalists in the corridor outside. The man, Han’s cousin Thrackan Sal-Solo, glanced around briefly, saw that he was standing between Leia and the door, then moved forward so the holocams would

have a view of her face. She slid down and tried to hide behind Dr. Nimbi, who recognized what she was doing and quietly positioned himself in front of her.

Sal-Solo scowled at the doctor, then looked Han and Leia over and nodded to the CorSec officer. "That's them. Well done, Captain."

"Thank you, Governor-General."

"Governor-General?" Han repeated, trying not to scoff and, to Leia's ear at least, failing. "You've come up in the galaxy, cousin."

"The Five Brothers reward those who protect them," Sal-Solo said.

"Yes—it seems reekcats always land on their feet," Leia said.

Less than a decade earlier, Sal-Solo had held her family hostage in a failed attempt to establish an independent Corellian sector. More recently, he had inadvertently destroyed an entire Hapan battle fleet by using an ancient alien artifact called Centerpoint Station to attack a hostile force of Yuuzhan Vong. Given that Leia had been responsible for bringing the Hapans into the war, she was probably the only person in the galaxy who despised Han's cousin more than Han did. And it did not help matters that Sal-Solo had been hailed as a hero for his foolish actions and, eventually, elected governor-general of the entire Corellian sector.

"What's next?" Leia continued to glare at Sal-Solo. Han winced and drew his finger across his throat, but she ignored him. "Lose the war and become the New Republic Chief of State?"

Sal-Solo half turned toward the holocam outside the door. "My allegiance is to the Corellian system alone." His voice was stiff and self-conscious. "And you'd be smart to curb that lightsaber tongue of yours, Princess Leia. An insult to the man is an insult to the office."

"Really?" Leia propped herself up on her free elbow until the holocam lights warmed her face. "In this case, I should think it is the man himself who is the insult."

Sal-Solo glared at her in disbelief, then stormed over to the door and stuck his head into the corridor. "Clear the hall! Can't you see this is an isolation ward?"

The holocam illuminated his face briefly before he palmed the activation panel and the door closed. He stood facing the wall until the corridor was finally empty, then turned to Leia with eyes as dark as black holes.

"You must have a death wish," he said.

"You're the one who wanted to play this out in the media," Leia said. "Don't blame me if you can't handle it. Wouldn't it have been easier to keep things quiet and ignore us?"

"Nothing would have suited me more—except maybe sending you off with a squad of Yuuzhan Vong infiltrators," Sal-Solo said. "Unfortunately, the choice wasn't mine. I didn't know either of you was here until I saw on a newsvid that Han Solo had just killed three Corellian citizens."

"Sorry about that," Han said, not appearing sorry at all.

Sal-Solo gave him a dark look, then looked back to Leia. "There won't be any charges, provided you—"

"Charges?" Han exclaimed. Even Leia could not tell whether he was angry or surprised; they been apart so long—and gone through so much alone—that she felt like she did not know him now. "For killing a bunch of Peace Brigaders?"

"They weren't in the Peace Brigade," Sal-Solo said. "CorSec Intelligence says they were local."

"That doesn't mean they weren't Peace Brigade," Han said.

"But they weren't," Sal-Solo said. "Roxi Barl is an independent contractor. She didn't like orders, which rules out the Peace Brigade or anyone associated with the Yuuzhan Vong. Or so Intelligence tells me."

"Then who was she working for?" Han demanded.

Thrackan shrugged. "That's a good question. Fortunately, it's also one that, as of an hour from now, will no longer concern me."

Han scowled. "No?"

"Because you'll be gone by then," Thrackan said.

"Gone?" Han shook his head. "We're not going anywhere until Leia can walk."

Leia frowned. Their faces had been on newsvids all over the system, and he was talking about staying until she could walk. What kind of rocket juice had he been drinking while they were apart?

"Han," Leia said gently. "We talked this over. You know I may never—"

Han whirled on her. "Until you walk, Leia."

Leia recoiled, and Han hovered over the bed, staring into her eyes, not blinking, not breathing, not wavering, as though he could change what had happened on Duro—maybe even what had happened before that—through sheer force of will.

"Han, we can't," she said at last. "By now, bounty hunters and Peace Brigaders from all over the system will be converging on the medcenter. And even if Thrackan wanted to protect us, he couldn't. It would give the Yuuzhan Vong too much reason to come see if Centerpoint is still operational."

"And he's just sending us on our way?" Han scoffed. "Straight into a Yuuzhan Vong patrol, that's where he's sending us."

"He can't, Han," Leia said. "He can't take the chance we'd break under torture and tell them Centerpoint isn't working."

Han considered this, then glanced at his cousin.

"If it makes you feel better, I could always have you killed," Sal-Solo offered amicably. "That works for me."

"And how do you think Anakin would like that?" Leia retorted. Their son Anakin was the only one who had ever been able to fully activate Centerpoint Station, and his absence was one reason the ancient superweapon wasn't working now. "He doesn't care for you much as it is, Thrackan. I doubt he'd be very helpful if you arranged the death of his parents."

Sal-Solo's eyes narrowed, but he nodded. "As long as we're agreed, then. You'll leave within the hour."

"Han," Dr. Nimbi said helpfully, "she can handle the journey if you stop at bacta parlors along the way." He hesitated a moment, then added, "Leia will be fine. It's your, uh, friend I'm worried about."

Han seemed confused. "Friend?"

"In tank three," Dr. Nimbi said. "I don't think you should leave her behind, not with all those bounty hunters and Peace Brigaders on the way."

"Oh—right. Our friend." Han glanced at Leia, and something roguish came to his eye, something sly and fun and conspiratorial that had not been there since before Chewbacca's death. He looked back to Sal-Solo and sighed. "Look, I don't mean to be difficult, but we can't go without Jaina."

"Jaina? Jaina's here?"

Leia thought she had been the one to blurt the question, but realized that was not so when all eyes turned to Sal-Solo. At least she understood why Han had been acting so strangely. She had a vague memory of a deep-space rendezvous with the Jade Shadow, of kissing her brother and each of her children good-bye and telling them she would see them again on Coruscant. Something must have happened. Perhaps Han had needed Jaina to help him

fly the *Falcon*, or perhaps Mara and Luke had run into trouble and been forced to divert. Maybe all of her children were on Corellia. She hoped not. She hoped Jacen and Anakin were safe on Coruscant . . . but it would be good to see them, too. So good.

“. . . Anakin?” Sal-Solo was asking. “Is he here, too?”

“Just Jaina,” Han said firmly. “Anakin and Jacen are on Coruscant.”

“Of course, you would say that.” Sal-Solo was thinking aloud. If he could force Anakin to reactivate Centerpoint, he would have no worries from the Yuuzhan Vong or the New Republic. He could use it to isolate the whole Corellian system and run the place as his personal empire. “But I can find out. I have my ways.”

“Yeah—you could comm them on Coruscant,” Han said. “Feel free to reverse the HoloNet charges—I know how strapped things are here in Corellia.”

“Wait—what was that about tank three?” Leia demanded, not paying much attention to the exchange between Han and Sal-Solo. “Jaina’s in a bacta tank? What happened?”

“You remember.” Again, Han gave her a strange glare. “That hit on Duro turned out to be worse than we thought.”

The stress alarm behind the bed started to beep again.

“Will you please disconnect that thing?” Leia demanded. Whatever had happened—whatever Han was trying to tell her—she did not want a machine giving them away. “And get me a repulsor chair. I want to see my daughter.”

“Yes.” Sal-Solo was scowling and studying Han, obviously wondering why Leia seemed so surprised. “Why don’t we all go?”

Dr. Nimbi arranged for a repulsor chair, then unstrapped Leia’s arm from the safety rail, hung the necessary IV lines on the bag hook attached to the chair, and helped her out of bed.

Leia’s legs were no sooner lowered than they began to ache with a pain a hundred times worse than childbirth. It was unlike anything she had ever experienced, a bursting, throbbing, burning kind of anguish that made her wish the Yuuzhan Vong had finished the job and cut them all the way off. She caught Sal-Solo staring and looked down to see two huge Hutt-like things sticking out where her legs should have been.

“If you’re going to gape,” Leia said, “I wish you wouldn’t smile.”

Sal-Solo covered his mouth, which was not actually smiling, and turned away. Accompanied by the CorSec agents, Sal-Solo, and even the nurse, Dr. Nimbi led them past the droid's monitoring post down the opposite corridor. Leia's heart began to pound immediately. The door of the bacta parlor was ringed by black blossoms of soot. Opposite, the ruins of the waiting room were set off by the jagged remains of a small half wall. They had been determined, these bounty hunters, and it made Leia shudder to think how close they must have come to capturing her only daughter.

As they reached the bacta parlor, Leia noticed an anvil-headed Arcona sitting in one of the few undamaged chairs. He met her gaze long enough to nod, then went back to staring at his feet. She steered her chair into the bacta parlor behind Han, the nurse, and the others.

They stopped in front of tank three, where a badly wounded woman of at least thirty years of age was floating inside. She was several centimeters taller than Leia and well muscled, and though there was something vaguely familiar about her face, she bore no resemblance at all to either Han or Leia. Most telling of all, her head was surrounded by a cloud of silky hair; like Leia, Jaina had left hers in a decontamination lock on Duro.

Leia craned her neck, checking the other tanks for an occupant that could be her daughter. There was none; only a Selonian with an amputated tail.

"This is Jaina?" Sal-Solo asked, clearly as doubtful as Leia herself. "She's a little old to be your daughter, Han."

"She's been flying for Rogue Squadron," Han said. "You'd be surprised how space combat ages a girl."

And Leia finally understood. For some reason she did not yet know, Han and Dr. Nimbi were trying to get this woman off Corellia. Jaina was not there at all; none of her children were. Leia should have been relieved, but instead she felt let down and desperately alone.

". . . that right, Leia?" Han was asking.

"Yes, of course," Leia answered, with no idea whatsoever what she was agreeing to. "That's true."

Han nodded assertively. "You see?"

"Does space combat also change eye color?" the nurse asked, studying the data display attached to the mystery woman's tank. "I seem to recall that Jaina's eyes are brown, like her mother's. This patient's are listed as green."

"Cosmetic tinting," Leia explained. Even if her heart was not in it, she knew what Han needed from her. "To make her harder to identify."

Sal-Solo looked doubtful. "What are you trying to pull, cousin? This woman can't be your daughter."

"I could confirm her identity with a simple genetic test," Dr. Nimbi suggested. "We could have the results in, oh, two days."

Sal-Solo glowered at the doctor, then turned to the nurse. "Check the admission data. Who's the responsible party?"

Han had not changed so much in his time away that Leia could no longer see through his sabacc face. He awaited the nurse's response with a feigned air of disinterest, but his eyes were fixed behind her, where a reflection on the surface of tank two showed the data scrolling up the display. When the screen finally stopped rolling, its reflection showed several blank data fields. Han's gaze shifted quickly back to the nurse.

"She was admitted anonymously." He stated it as though he knew it for a fact. "No name, no contact information."

The nurse's jaw fell, but she nodded. "Not even notes about the receiving circumstances."

Han turned to Sal-Solo with a smirk. "That's all the proof you need, Governor-General." He pressed a finger to the bacta tank, and the green eyes of the woman inside fluttered open. "She leaves with us—or I inform every media station in the system that you're holding our daughter against our will."

Sal-Solo glared at him. "I could prove that you're lying."

"True," Han said. "But could you prove it to the Yuuzhan Vong?"

Sal-Solo's face grew even stormier, and he turned to the doctor. "Can she be moved—now?"

"We can lend them a temporary bacta tank," Dr. Nimbi said. "As long as they change the fluid each time they stop for Leia, this patient should be fine as well."

Sal-Solo studied the tank, no doubt trying as feverishly as Leia to puzzle out what the woman inside had to do with the Solos—and of what interest she might be to whoever had sent Roxi Barl. Finally, a full minute after Leia had given up on the riddle, he made a sour face and turned to Dr. Nimbi. "I think I do see a certain family resemblance," Sal-Solo said. "But you'll sell the tank to them, not lend. I don't want anyone coming to return it."

Chapter 3

The security hatch finally irised open, revealing the cavernous interior of the public berthing facility where the Solos had hidden the *Millennium Falcon* in plain sight. On any other planet, they would have rented a private bay in some very discreet luxury dock. But on security-obsessed Corellia, such measures inevitably drew more attention than they avoided. Leia and Han spent a moment studying the activity on the docking bay's floor, then exited the cramped access lock.

The hatch whispered shut behind them, and finally they were someplace where they could talk. Putting her growing fatigue out of mind, Leia caught Han's arm and pulled him around to face her.

"Han, what's going on?" A muffled clamor sounded inside the access lock as their CorSec escorts entered with their "daughter" and her portable bacta tank. "Who is that woman, and why did Nimbi want us to remove her from a medcenter she seems very much in need of?"

"Because she may be in as much danger as you are." Han squatted on his haunches in front of Leia, placing himself at eye level—and turning his back to any spymikes that might be aimed at them from the facility's depths. "She did some things to help me during the firefight. I think she's a Jedi."

"A Jedi?" Leia did not ask for details or reasons. The CorSec agents would be in the access lock only a few moments, just long enough for the security computers to scan their faces and confirm their identities. "We may not be doing her any favors. Whoever sent Barl is still on our trail."

Han glanced over his shoulder. "Where?"

"Behind us, in the access lock," Leia said. "You remember when I said that CorSec agent was stealing?"

Han's brow furrowed. "Yeah?"

"I wasn't hallucinating. My datapad is gone."

Now he looked angry. "That Ranat!"

"Han, don't say anything about it. The money was well spent." The device had only been a cheap replacement for the one she'd lost on Duro, and there was nothing on it but a few half-finished—probably incoherent—letters to family and friends. "He also took two datachits and the recording rod."

"That's money well spent?"

"It is when you realize he didn't touch my credit case," Leia said. "Or the credit chips you left on the dresser."

"He's a spy," Han said.

Leia nodded. "Not a very good one, but I think so. Probably working for the same people who sent Roxi Barl."

The hatch behind Leia began to hiss. Han glanced over her shoulder, then asked in a low voice, "What about the others?"

"Only the one," Leia whispered. She was fairly certain of what she said; the agent had been working as hard to hide his thefts from his officer as from them.

The hatch stopped hissing, and two CorSec security men emerged with the mystery woman and her portable bacta tank. The guards were the spy and the same officer who had been in Leia's room when she was awakened. She let her chin drop, less feigning exhaustion than allowing it to show. Despite the stim-shots and painkillers Dr. Nimbi had pressed on her, the effort of sitting upright was taking its toll.

The hatch closed, and the officer said, "Go on, Solo. The rest of the detail will stay behind to hold the media back."

"Thank you," Leia said, and she meant it. Without a wall of CorSec agents to keep the holocrews at bay, she felt fairly certain the journalists would have followed them aboard the *Falcon*. "I thought we were going to have stowaways."

"No need to worry about that," the spy said. "We'll do a search."

Han muttered something that sounded suspiciously like "over your dead body," then led the way around the perimeter of the floor—no experienced spacer ever cut across a public docking bay—toward a shadowy disk resting

between the blockier forms of two ancient transports. Though Leia had never been a fan of the *Falcon's* new matte-black finish, she had to admit that it did as much to reduce the famous ship's public profile as it did to hide the hull blemishes acquired over so many decades of rough use. Now, even when someone did happen to notice the vessel sitting in the murk, it would hardly draw a second glance.

She wondered if that was what Han had intended when he chose the new color, or if it had just been a way of expressing his grief over Chewbacca's loss. She might never know; they were no longer close enough that she could guess, and she was not comfortable asking. How sad was that, after defeating the Empire and having three children together?

As they approached the *Falcon*, an anvil-headed silhouette with glittering yellow eyes emerged from between the landing struts, thin arms held casually out to the sides to show that his three-fingered hands were empty.

"Captain Solo," he rasped. "Glad to make your acquaintance."

"Not so fast, Twinkle-eyes," Han said. "Just step away from the ship and go. We're not giving interviews."

"Interviews?"

The figure laughed coarsely and stepped into the light, revealing the salt-addicted Arcona who had exchanged glances with Leia in the hospital. He had a flat reptilian face with skin the color of durasteel and a cockeyed mouth that made him look half salted; over his threadbare tunic, he now wore a shabby flight tabard lined with dozens of fastclose cargo pockets.

"I'm no holojournalist," the Arcona said. "All I'm looking for is a ride off this mudball."

Leaving the portable bacta tank hovering on its repulsor gurney, the CorSec agents drew their blasters and moved up. "Do as Solo says," the officer ordered. "And give me your identichip."

The Arcona reached for a pocket as though to obey, then fluttered his fingers in the agents' direction. "I'm not Corellian," he said. "I don't need an identichip."

"He's not Corellian," the subordinate said.

"He doesn't need an identichip," the officer added.

Leia's jaw was already hanging open, but Han was not so easily impressed.

"Cute trick. Now move along—and take your buddies." He jerked his thumb at the two CorSec agents. "We're not taking riders."

The Arcona showed a row of crooked fangs in what was probably a smile. "I'm willing to earn my keep, Captain." He glanced in Leia's direction, then his tabard fluttered open to show her the lightsaber hanging on his belt, and she felt something warm slither over her in the Force. "I'm a first-class YT-1300 copilot. Have one of my own, if I can ever get back to the blasted thing."

"Han." Leia grabbed her husband's arm. "I think—"

Han pulled away. "In a minute." He continued to glare at the Arcona. "I don't care if you fly Star Destroyers, you're not getting on my ship."

"Han!" Leia snapped. "Yes, he is."

Han started to argue, then seemed to see something in Leia's eyes that made him think better of it. "He is?"

Thankful she could still reach him, Leia nodded. "I think you should give him a chance," she said. "I'm certainly not going to be much of a copilot."

The fact of the matter was that C-3PO, still hiding aboard the *Falcon*, could help with most of the copilot's chores, but Han seemed to realize Leia was trying to tell him something else. He turned to the Arcona and studied him from top to bottom, contemplating his ashen complexion, threadbare clothes, and listing features.

"Well, you look like a pilot," Han said. "What's the sequence for an emergency ion drive engagement?"

"Warm circuits, actuate, power up," the Arcona answered.

Han raised his brow. "Emergency shutdown?"

"Power down, then disengage."

"And where's the vortex stabilizer found?"

The Arcona's flat head folded slightly inward at the center, then he raised his three-fingered hand and said, "You already know where the vortex stabilizer—"

Han slapped the hand down. "Don't try that stuff with me. Who do you think you're dealing with?"

The Arcona shrugged, then complained, "How should I know where the vortex stabilizer is? That's not a crew-serviceable part."

Han actually smiled, then slapped the Arcona on the shoulder. "You'll do."

"Thanks, Captain." The Arcona did not seem all that relieved. He pushed between the CorSec agents toward the portable bacta tank. "I'll take it from here, fellas."

The officer stepped aside, but the subordinate stood fast. "Our orders are to load the patient ourselves."

"That was before we had help," Leia said. "And your orders were to see us off. No one said anything about snooping around on the *Falcon*."

She cast a pointed glare at the pocket containing her datapad. The subordinate's face turned bright red, and he stepped aside so quickly he nearly fell.

"Hmmm." The Arcona smiled and, out of the corner of his tilted mouth, whispered, "Interesting technique."

He retrieved the repulsor gurney, then the agents returned Han's blaster, and the group boarded together. C-3PO was waiting for them atop the ramp.

"Oh, thank the maker you're back!" he said, arms pumping madly. "I can't tell you how many times I was forced to lower the retractable blaster—"

"Not now, Threepio," Han said, brushing past and starting for the cockpit. "Secure yourself for launch."

"But Captain Solo, you and Princess Leia have been all over the newsvids. They're saying you killed three people, and quite a few of the commentators seem to think there should be some sort of legal inquiry—"

"See-Threepio, we know," Leia said, guiding her chair into the access ring. "This is . . ."

She turned to the Arcona.

"A friend of your doctor's." He plucked an eavesdropping device off the portable bacta tank and crushed it under his boot, then added, "There are more."

Leia nodded and turned back to C-3PO. "Help our guest secure the gurney for launch."

Seeing that her chair would prevent the bulky bacta tank from entering the access ring, Leia moved ahead. She was feeling terribly tired and weak, and her first instinct was to turn toward the main deck and stay out of the way. But she had been alone too much over the last year, and the thought of sitting by herself while Han and his new copilot solved their problems was more than she could bear. She needed to be with her husband—even if she was no longer quite sure he wanted her.

The repulsor chair was fairly compact, and once she had lowered the telescoping pole on which the IV bags hung, there was no trouble guiding

it up the outrigger corridor. But the cockpit itself already had four seats, so she had to settle for magnoclampping her chair in place just outside the door. To his credit, Han did not ask what she was doing there. He was so busy toggling switches and checking dials that Leia was not even sure he knew.

The Arcona squeezed past and, taking the copilot's seat, slipped into the start-up routine so smoothly that it was obvious he had been telling the truth about flying his own YT-1300. There were a few glitches as he encountered some of the *Falcon's* modifications, but Leia could tell by Han's patience how impressed he was. She tried not to be jealous.

They were within thirty seconds of launch when the inevitable glitch finally came.

"The ramp light's still on." Han pointed at a panel on the Arcona's side of the cockpit. "That should have been checked off a minute ago."

"I thought I had."

The Arcona hit the reset. The light blinked off, then instantly relit.

Han cursed, then activated the intercom. "Threepio, I think the ramp's stuck again. Give it a check."

No acknowledgment came.

"Threepio?"

Han cursed. Leia began to unclamp her chair.

"No, I'll go." The Arcona unbuckled his harness and rose. "You shouldn't be back there alone. This could be trouble."

"Thanks." Han unbuckled his crash webbing and loosened his blaster, then turned to Leia and said, "I'm glad you're up here."

Leia smiled. "Me, too."

They waited in silence for nearly a minute before the ramp light finally went out and the Arcona returned.

"It was just stuck," he said. "I banged the control panel, and it came up the rest of the way."

"Always works for me," Han said, starting the repulsor drives.

"What about Threepio?" Leia asked. She had an uneasy feeling—not danger sense, but of something that was not quite right. "Why didn't he answer?"

"I think he crossed some feeds connecting the bacta tank to the medical bank." The Arcona slipped smoothly back into his seat. "His circuit breaker was tripped. I reset it."

“That’s a new one.” Han shook his head, then opened a channel to the spaceport traffic center. “Control, this is Shadow Bird requesting launch clearance.”

Shadow Bird was the name under which they had berthed the *Falcon*.

“Negative, Shadow Bird,” came the reply. “Stand by.”

Han closed the channel. “What now?”

He activated the external security monitors, and they all waited in tense silence, expecting to see a CorSec boarding party or mob of bounty hunters come rushing out of the access locks.

A few moments later, Control’s voice crackled over the speaker. “Corellian Security informs us there is no such vessel as Shadow Bird.” The message came over an open channel. “However, the *Millennium Falcon* is cleared for immediate departure.”

“Acknowledged.” Han wasted no time engaging the repulsor drives and leaving the docking bay; someone had just made certain that every ship within a hundred thousand kilometers would know which vessel they were. “And check that CorSec agent’s pockets. I saw him stealing a datapad. *Falcon* out.”

Chapter 4

The park-checked city of Coronet had barely receded beneath the *Falcon's* tail when Han swung south over the sea and slammed the ion throttles full forward, beginning a long arcing climb that would carry them over the pole to the opposite side of the planet. The comm speaker quickly erupted into vitriolic curses as Corellian Control protested both the unlawful trajectory and the over-city shock wave, but Han ignored the impoundment threats and disengaged the nacelle melt-safeties. After the send-off CorSec had given them, flying a standard launch pattern would be about as safe as jumping into a Sarlacc's pit.

The Arcona's golden eyes remained fixed on the temperature readouts. "I thought you had experience at this sort of thing." Because of the difficulty his compound eyes had making out distinct shapes, he was wearing a small optical scanner that read the display data and fed it into an earpiece in auditory form. "Every rookie smuggler in the galaxy knows you can't outrun a ship in orbit. They'll cut you off every time."

"You don't say?" Han tried to look surprised. "Because of the gravity drag?"

"And air friction and accumulated velocity and things like that." The Arcona glanced over his shoulder at Leia. "This is Han Solo, isn't it? The Han Solo?"

Han glanced over his shoulder and saw Leia shrug.

"You know, I've been wondering myself." Her eyes drooped and Han thought she might be falling asleep, then she added, "But when I checked, that's what his identichip read."

“One of them, anyway,” Han said, glad to hear an echo—no matter how faint—of Leia’s sharp wit.

They reached the other side of the planet. Han pulled back on the yoke, nosing the *Falcon* straight up. The nacelle temperatures shot off the gauges as the ion drives struggled to maintain velocity, and the Arcona’s slanted mouth fell open.

“Y-you’re at a hundred and t-t-twenty percent spec,” he stammered.

“You don’t say,” Han replied. “Bring up the tactical display and let’s see how things look.”

The Arcona kept his scanner fixed on the temperature gauges. “One twenty-seven.”

“Military alloys,” Leia explained. “We can go to one forty, or so Han tells me.”

“Maybe more, if I wanted to push,” Han bragged.

“Don’t,” the Arcona said. “I’m impressed enough.”

The Arcona brought up the tactical display, revealing a drop-shaped swarm of blips streaming around the planet in pursuit. He plotted intercept vectors. A web of flashing lines appeared on-screen, all intersecting well behind the dotted outline showing the *Falcon*’s projected position.

“I guess rookie smugglers don’t know everything,” Han said with a smirk. “Plot a course for Commenor.”

He waited a few seconds to be certain none of the *Falcon*’s pursuers had any tricks up its own drive nacelles, then diverted power for the rear shields and kept an eye out for surprises. Though he had plenty of questions for his new copilot, he stayed quiet and watched him work. Han had certainly seen more gifted navigators, but the Arcona’s approach was sound, and he used redundant routines to avoid mistakes.

After a few moments, he transferred the coordinates to Han’s display. “Want to double-check?”

“No need,” Han said. “I trust you.”

“Yeah?” The high corner of the Arcona’s mouth rose a little more. “Same here.”

The Arcona validated the coordinates, and Han initiated the hyperdrive. There was the usual inexplicable hesitation—Han had been trying for the last year to run down the cause—and his alarmed copilot looked over. Han raised a finger to signal patience, then the stars stretched into lines.

They spent a few moments checking systems before settling in for the ride to Commenor, then Han had time to consider his temporary copilot. He had not missed the lightsaber hanging inside the Arcona's ragged flight tabard, nor the significance of the mind game he had played on CorSec agents. Still, while there were now enough Jedi in the galaxy that Han no longer knew them all by name, he would have heard about an Arcona Jedi—especially a salt-addicted Arcona.

"So," Han asked. "Who are you?"

"Izal Waz." The Arcona turned and, smiling crookedly, extended his three-fingered hand. "Thanks for taking me aboard."

"Waz? Izal Waz?" Han shook the hand. "Your name sounds familiar."

Izal's gaze flickered downward, and he released Han's hand. "Anything's possible, but we haven't met."

"But I do know the name," Han said. "What about you, Leia?"

He turned to look and found her chin slumped against her chest. Though her eyes were closed, her brow was creased and her hands were twitching, and it made Han's heart ache to see her suffer so even in her sleep.

"Looks like I better put our patient to bed." Han unbuckled his crash webbing. "We'll talk more in a few minutes."

"Good," Izal Waz said. "I've always been curious about your years in the Corporate Sector."

That was hardly the discussion Han had in mind, but he left the pilot's chair and took Leia back to the first-aid bay. She did not stir, even when he lifted her into the bunk and connected her to the medical data banks. He knew she needed her rest, but he wished she would open her eyes just for a minute and give him a smile, some indication that she would recover—that they would. He had needed to mourn Chewbacca's death, he knew that, and maybe he had even needed to crisscross the galaxy helping Droma search for his clan. But only now was Han beginning to see how he had surrendered to his grief, or to understand that there had been a cost.

"Get well, Princess." He kissed Leia on the brow. "Don't give up on me yet."

The monitors showed no indication that she heard.

Han buckled the last safety strap across her chest and magnoclamped the repulsor chair to the deck beside her bunk, then went aft to check on the other patient aboard the *Falcon*. Her gurney was clamped to the floor of the crew quarters, a pair of data umbilicals connecting the portable bacta tank

to an auxiliary medical socket. C-3PO stood in a corner, his photoreceptors darkened and his metallic head canted slightly forward in his shutdown posture. The covers on the three bunks were rumpled.

Han did a quick check to make certain the bacta tank was still functioning, then reached behind C-3PO's head and reset his primary circuit breaker.

The droid's head rose. ". . . can't leave her in the middle of . . ." The sentence trailed off as his photoreceptors blinked to life. "Captain Solo! What happened?"

"Good question." Han glanced around. "I thought Izal turned you back on."

"If you are referring to that salt-happy Arcona whom Mistress Leia asked you to bring aboard, absolutely not!" He gestured at the portable bacta tank. "I was instructing him where to secure the gurney when . . . well, someone must have tripped my breaker."

"You didn't cross the medical bank data feeds?"

"Captain Solo, you know I don't relish memory wipes," C-3PO said. "And I assure you, I know the proper way to access a data feed. I wasn't even near it."

"That's what I was afraid of."

Han stepped over to a bunk and found what looked like a large black toenail on the covers. There were similar flakes on the other bunks, and, on the third, a pair of disassembled transmitters—the really small kind, such as a CorSec agent might hide on a portable bacta tank. Han placed his hand in the center of the rumpled covers. The bed was still warm.

"Go to the first-aid bay and stay with Leia." Han folded the flakes and transmitters into his hand, then started for the door. "Don't let anyone near her."

"Of course, Captain Solo." C-3PO clanged into the ring corridor behind him. "But how am I to stop them?"

"Comm me."

Han was already crossing the main hold toward the cockpit access tunnel. He was not at all surprised to discover that CorSec or the spy or maybe both had planted eavesdropping devices on the bacta tank—he had intended to check for them himself—but someone had disassembled the transmitters. That in itself did not mean Izal Waz had sneaked stowaways aboard, or even

if he had, that they were Peace Brigade collaborators or bounty hunters or agents hired by whoever had sent Roxi Barl. But it did raise a few questions.

Doing his best to appear nonchalant, Han stepped onto the flight deck and paused to glance at the navicomputer. According to the display, they remained on course to Commenor, so any hidden diversions the Arcona might have sneaked past Han had not yet occurred.

Han slipped into the pilot's chair. "Everything okay up here?"

"What could go wrong in ten minutes?" Izal continued to stare out the viewport, his color-hungry Arconan eyes mesmerized by the gray void of hyperspace. "You seem distressed."

"Distressed?" Han checked their position, reached up, and disengaged the hyperdrive. Then, as the sudden dazzle of starlight disoriented Izal, he drew his blaster and swiveled around to face the Arcona. "I'm not distressed. I'm mad. Furious, even."

Izal did not even seem all that surprised. He merely blinked the blindness from his eyes and gestured at the blaster. "That's not necessary. I can explain."

"You'd better hope so." Han opened his other hand and laid the black flakes and disassembled transmitters on a console between their seats. "When it comes to protecting my wife, I have a short temper."

Izal grinned and did not look at the items. "So I noticed in the isolation ward."

"You were the one in the bacta parlor?"

Izal nodded eagerly. "I helped."

When Han did not lower the blaster, a furrow appeared in Izal's brow, and he flicked his hand almost casually. Had Han been just any freighter captain concerned he was about to be hijacked by a rogue Jedi and his stowaway partners, the trick might have worked. As it was, Han had fought at Luke Skywalker's side often enough to anticipate such maneuvers, and his free hand was already clamped over the barrel, holding the weapon in his grasp.

"If it's going to come down to using it or losing it," Han warned, "I'll use it."

The blaster settled back into Han's hand.

"You're as short on gratitude as you are on temper," the Arcona complained. "Or maybe you just don't know how to trust."

"I'll trust you when I know who you are." Han set the blaster to stun, less to spare Izal than to avoid burning a hole through a crucial circuit board. "You own a lightsaber and you know a few Force tricks, but so did Darth Vader. As far as I'm concerned, you still look more like a bounty hunter than a Jedi Knight."

Izal sank into the copilot's seat like he had been punched.

"It's the salt habit, isn't it?" he asked. "You think no real Jedi would let himself come to this."

"If you're looking for sympathy, you're on the wrong ship," Han said. The truth was he felt a certain empathy for the troubled Arcona, but now was not the time to share shortcomings. "You must know I'm no stranger to the Jedi. If you were a Jedi, I'd know you."

"You do." Izal's gaze slipped away from Han's, and his face darkened to charcoal. "There's a reason you recognized my name, I had some trouble at the academy. One bite of Kenth's nerfloaf—"

"Of course," Han said, recalling the incident. A three-month supply of salt had vanished in the space of a few days, and then so had the student who choked it all down. "But you were only there a few months."

Han cast a meaningful glance at Izal's belt.

Izal nodded. "Hardly long enough to build my lightsaber," he said. "Eventually, I found a Master who taught me to accept my weakness—and who helped me find my strength."

Han raised his brow.

"And I'm sure you don't know her," Izal said.

"Your story is smelling more like a Gamorrean kitchen every minute," Han warned. He gestured at the flakes and disassembled transmitters. "And you still haven't explained these."

"Oh . . . those." Izal's slanted smile might have been one of relief or anxiety. "That's easy."

"So explain."

"First, I wasn't keeping this a secret," Izal said. "I was going to tell you when things settled down."

"Quit stalling," Han ordered.

Izal swallowed hard, which was quite a sight given the Arcona's long neck. "All right." He picked up one of the black flakes. "This scale—"

The proximity alarm broke into a shriek. Han glanced at his tactical display and found a wall of blips taking form behind the *Falcon*.

"Nice trick," Han said. He hit the reset, but the alarm resumed its screeching half a second later. The tactical display returned with even more blips. "Now cut it out. You're testing my patient nature."

"You think this is a Force trick?" Izal's eyes were fixed on the tactical display, and there was enough panic in his voice that Han almost believed him. "I'm not that good."

"So they're real?" Han was starting to worry. There were no transponder codes beneath the blips, and vessels without transponder codes tended to be pirates—or worse. "What are they doing here?"

"I don't know." Izal began the ion engine warm-start procedure. "I must have missed a homing beacon."

"Or planted one," Han said. Homing beacons could not be used to track a ship through hyperspace, only to locate it once it returned to realspace. For a flotilla to arrive so quickly, it had to have been lying somewhere outside the Corellian system, ready to depart as soon as it learned the *Falcon's* position. "This seems way too handy."

"Or desperate." Izal brought the ion drives on-line. "I'm not the one trying to snatch your wife."

"I'd like to believe you." Han fired a stun bolt into the Arcona's ribs. "But I just can't take the chance."

Leaving Izal to slump over the side of his chair, Han holstered his blaster and hit the throttles. The ambushers' rate of closure began to slow. Some of the leaders started to fire, but Han did not even raise the *Falcon's* power-hungry energy shields. The ship's sensor array computer had identified the newcomers as a motley mix of Y-wings and old T-65 X-wings, and neither of those could fire effectively at such long range.

C-3PO's voice came over the intercom. "Captain Solo?"

"Have the stowaways got Leia?" Han asked. There was a time when his thoughts wouldn't have leapt instantly to the worst scenario, but a lot had changed in the galaxy since then—and in him. "If they've got Leia, you tell them—"

"Mistress Leia is well and quite alone," C-3PO said. "Aside from me, of course."

"Keep it that way." Han activated the navicomputer and began to punch coordinates; though the course to Commenor remained the same, transit times would have to be recalculated from the new entry point. "And don't bother me unless that changes."

“Of course, Captain Solo.” A distant streak of red flashed above the cockpit canopy as a cannon bolt reached maximum range and faded away. “But—”

“Threepio, not now!”

The starfighters, especially the X-wings, were still closing. Han plotted a course projection and saw what he had known intuitively: they would reach effective firing range only a few seconds before the *Falcon* entered hyperspace.

Han slammed his palm against the yoke. “Sith spit!”

He changed the tactical display to a larger scale. Sitting dead ahead, well beyond the range of anything less sensitive than the *Falcon*’s reconnaissance-grade sensor suite, was a fast-freight of 250 meters. Not large, but large enough to carry a tractor beam that would prevent the *Falcon* from jumping to hyperspace.

Han cursed again and canceled the calculations. He brought the *Falcon* around hard, and the starfighters angled to cut him off. Daggers of light began to slice the darkness to his right. Han brought the energy shields up, then felt a shudder as both sets of the *Falcon*’s powerful quad laser cannons began to fire.

“Leia?” he gasped. “Threepio?”

“We’re still here, Captain Solo,” the droid replied. “In the first-aid bay as you instructed.”

Han glanced over the fire-control computer to see if Izal had left the quad lasers on automatic. He hadn’t. “Then who’s on the guns?”

“Captain Solo, that’s what I was—”

A rhythmic hissing sounded from the seat behind the pilot’s, and then all Han could hear was his own scream. Paying no attention as the first pirate shots blossomed against the energy shields, he leapt up and reached for his blaster.

A clawed hand pushed him down. “Sit,” rasped a deep voice. “This one shall replace Jedi Waz.”

The claw removed itself, and Han glanced over to see a huge scaled figure in a brown Jedi robe. The newcomer lifted Izal Waz out of the copilot’s seat with one hand, then tossed him to the rear of the flight deck and slipped into his place. A thick tail flopped over the arm of the chair, and beneath the robe’s cowl, Han glimpsed a reptilian face with slit-pupiled eyes and upward-jutting fangs. An adult Barabel.

A sheet of crimson light flashed along the *Falcon's* starboard side. Han's attention remained fixed on the Barabel. With scales as black as space and a tail that forced him to perch on the edge of the seat, his jagged features made him look as dangerous as his robe did mysterious. Han only hoped the Jedi apparel was evidence of a more patient nature than most Barabels possessed.

The Barabel pointed a claw at Han's hand, still resting on his holstered weapon. "This one will let you blast him later. For now, perhaps you fly the ship."

"Whatever you want." Aware that even without the Force, the Barabel could have taken the blaster—and probably the arm holding it—anytime he wanted, Han grabbed the yoke with both hands. "Where we going?"

"You are the pilot, Han Solo." He waved a claw at the tactical display, which showed a flight of X-wings streaking in to cut them off. "Though this one thinkz we should turn burnerz and run."

"Can't." Han pointed to the fast-freight's symbol, now giving chase in the upper left corner of the tactical display. "She'll snag us with a tractor beam. Old pirate trap."

The *Falcon's* cannons lashed out in rapid-fire sequence. The lead starfighter dissolved into static, mirrored in the darkness outside by a distant orange bloom. Han whistled, awed as much by the timing of the attack as by its accuracy. The other three X-wings swung into a front oblique attack. Again, the *Falcon's* laser cannons flashed. Again, an X-wing burst into a ball of superheated gas.

When the fireball died this time, it was replaced by a pair of white dots. They were a little larger than stars and a whole lot brighter.

The white dots swelled to white disks.

"Concussion missiles?" the Barabel asked.

"Not that lucky," Han didn't even bother to check the tactical display for propellant trails. He had seen plenty of those expanding white dots—though usually from the bridge of a Super Star Destroyer. "Proton torpedoes."

The white disks swelled into white circles.

Han nosed the *Falcon* down into a wild corkscrewing evasive pattern. Somehow, the mysterious gunners remained accurate, crippling two starfighters as the main body of the pirate fleet reached effective range. The first proton torpedo arced past so close that the canopy went white.

The Barabel sissed. "Someone wantz you dead. Really wantz you dead."

Han blinked his vision clear and saw a Y-wing zip past the cockpit, a crazy line of laserfire chasing it along. Another X-wing came in firing, and he had to turn head-on to force it to pull up. When he could finally check the tactical display, he found a dozen starfighters circling the *Falcon*, with another dozen hanging back to cut off escape. The good news was that the second proton torpedo had already passed by, its propellant trail tracing a long arc away from the *Falcon*'s tail.

"They don't want us dead," Han said. The torpedoes had been fired with disabled homing beacons. "They're forcing our hand."

A pair of battered X-wings streaked into view, the *Falcon*'s cannon bolts warming their shields. They collided in front of the cockpit, and a pair of rhythmic hisses, the first sounds Han had heard from the turrets, sounded over the intercom. Then pirates were all over the *Falcon*, coming in close and battering its shields from every angle. Depletion warnings and overload signals beeped and buzzed.

The Barabel studied the instrument panel in helpless confusion. "Where is the load balancer?"

"I'll handle the shields." Han jerked a thumb at the navicomputer. "Can you use that?"

The Barabel bristled his scales. "We are good pilots."

"Okay—I didn't mean anything by it," Han said. "Plot a course to Commenor."

He pulled the *Falcon* out of its evasive pattern and turned toward the fast-freight. The cockpit shuddered and the lights dimmed as the starfighters landed a devastating volley, and a damage-control buzzer announced a hull breach in the number two cargo hold. Two more X-wings vanished from the tactical display. Han sealed the breached hold. Then, finally, the pirates began to stand off, keeping the pressure on but now concentrating on avoiding the deadly streams of light pouring from the *Falcon*'s cannon turrets.

Han shifted more power to the rear shields and looked over to check on the Barabel's progress. The calculations were almost finished, but the final coordinates lay closer to Corellia than Commenor. Han pretended not to notice, but cursed inside and searched his memory for some hint as to who Izal Waz and his Barabel friends could be working for. Not the Yuuzhan Vong, at least not directly; the Yuuzhan Vong hated Jedi. And certainly not for whoever had hired the pirates; they had killed too many. Maybe a hidden

cabal of Dark Jedi, hoping to use Leia to somehow turn the war to their advantage.

Han shifted the tactical scale so it would display only what a standard sensor suite might reveal, and the fast-freight vanished off the screen. Trying to make it appear that he was fine-tuning the data filters, Han quietly opened his own input to the navicomputer and began calculations for the trip to Commenor.

The Barabel looked over. "They will know from our initial course we are going to Commenor." He completed his calculations and sent them to Han's display for verification. "This rendezvous is safer."

"Safer for you."

"For you," the Barabel insisted. "They are not after us."

The fast-freight appeared on the tactical display. Han pushed the *Falcon* into what he hoped would look like an evasive climb. The starfighters closed, hammering his shields, trying to drive him back toward the freighter. Han held his turn, trying to convince the enemy pilots he really had been surprised. The turret gunners made it look good by dispersing their fire to slow pursuit.

Something popped in the life-support control panel, and an acrid stench filled the air. The Barabel pulled off the cover and smothered a burning circuit board with his bare palm, then looked over wide-eyed.

"You are trying to get us killed?"

"This needs to look good," Han said.

The *Falcon* bucked as the fast-freight, still too distant to see with the naked eye, locked on with its tractor beam. Han spun them perpendicular to the direction of pull—then cut back the throttles to avoid escaping. He did not have to ease off much; the tractor beam was a powerful one.

The *Falcon's* cannon turrets spun to attack their captor.

"No!" Han ordered on the intercom. "Keep the fighters away."

There was a short silence, then a voice rasped, "Tesar?"

The Barabel—Tesar—studied Han, then said nothing and started to tend damage alarms.

"Listen," Han began, "I'm the—"

The turrets spun back toward the starfighters. Another pirate vanished from the tactical display, and the rest began to stand off again. They continued to pour fire at the *Falcon*, though they seemed more interested

in keeping the deadly laser cannons occupied than approaching close enough to cause damage. The *Falcon* continued to slip toward the fast-freight.

Han returned to his calculations. Tesar watched for a moment, then tapped a claw on his own coordinates.

"This is better," he said. "Trust me."

Han did not even look up. "Where have I heard that before?"

"Your enemies are well organized. Even if we escape this—"

"I have a plan," Han assured him.

"—they will have someone waiting on Commenor."

"Better the enemy I know than one I don't," Han retorted.

The *Falcon* slipped faster toward the freighter. Han added power, but the slide continued to accelerate.

"We are not your enemy, Han Solo," Tesar said.

"Quiet." Han was still struggling to finish the calculations. "And kill those alarms. I'm working here."

Tesar made no move to obey. "Why do you not trust us? We are Jedi Knightz."

"I said quiet!"

Thinking he just might be quick enough if he caught the Barabel by surprise, he reached for his blaster—then Tesar extended a hand, and Han was nearly jerked from his chair as weapon and holster tore free of his belt.

The Barabel caught the blaster and tucked it inside his robe. "This one said you could blast him later."

Rubbing his thigh where the holster thong had snapped, Han said, "Look, Luke Skywalker is my brother-in-law. I know the Jedi, and you're not one of them."

The scales rose on Tesar's face, and his pupils narrowed to angry slits. He studied Han, his nostrils flaring and his long tongue flicking his lips, then he turned his face away.

"We are still young, but we are Jedi." His reflection in the canopy was twisted into a snarling mask. "If you know the Jedi, then you must know Master Eelysa."

"Of course," Han said. Eelysa had been one of Luke's earliest pupils, a girl born on Coruscant soon after the Emperor's death. Taken to the academy on Yavin 4 as a child, she had matured into one of Luke's most trusted Jedi Knights and now spent most of her time on complicated, years-

long missions. “But I haven’t seen her in—well, since she was a teenager younger than Jaina.”

“Yes, you have.” When Tesar looked back, his face was more composed. “Eelysa is the one we are guarding. She is the Master of our Master.”

“The Master of your Master?”

“She taught my mother on Barab I,” Tesar said. “When we learned she had been injured, we were sent to Corellia to guard her.”

Han felt instantly sick and foolish. Now that Tesar had mentioned Eelysa’s name, the woman from the bacta tank did look familiar. And spying on Corellia was exactly the kind of high-risk, long-term mission in which she specialized. If anyone was going to train Jedi Knights he had never heard of, it would be Eelysa.

“Look, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean anything by what I said.”

The Barabel looked confused. “Then why did you say it?”

Before Han could explain, another Barabel voice rasped over the intercom, “Captain, can we shoot the frigate yet?”

“Frigate?”

The tactical display now showed the starfighters standing completely off, and the generic fast-freight tag had been changed to KDY frigate, Lancer-class.

“Uh, hold your fire for a minute, fellas.”

“Fellas?” a voice rasped. “We are amused, Captain Solo.”

This brought a long round of sissing, which Han did his best to ignore as he interrogated the sensor computer for more details.

“They are not fellas,” Tesar confided quietly. “They are sisters. We are all hatchmates.”

“Hatchmates?” Han echoed, his attention fixed on the details scrolling down his display. “Like wives?”

“Wives!” Tesar broke into an uncontrollable fit of hissing and slapped his chair arm so hard he nearly broke it. “Now is no time for off-color jokes, Captain.”

From what the mass meters and infrared analyzers were showing, the frigate was one of the stripped-down versions that had been converted to planetary customs use. It would have an advanced sensor suite, overpowered tractor beam, and huge hangar bay—but only six cannon towers and civilian-class shields. And while most pirates would have loved to get their

hands on such a ship, it was hardly likely. They would have had to steal it from a planetary government.

Han opened a comm channel. "Anonymous customs frigate, this is the *Millennium Falcon*." The ship came into a view, a tiny sliver of light glowing against the starry backdrop of empty space. "Explain your actions."

There was a moment's pause, then a haughty Kuati voice said, "Our actions speak for themselves. Prepare for capture and boarding, and you will be treated fairly."

Han started to make a rude reply, then thought better of it. "Do we have another choice?"

"Not if you wish to live. Frigate out."

The channel had barely closed before Tesar growled, "You would surrender your mate?"

"It was a lie, Tesar. You've been spending too much time with Selonians."

Han lowered the energy shields and powered down the ion drives, then swung the *Falcon's* nose around as though surrendering to the inevitable. The frigate began to grow rapidly larger, in the space of few breaths swelling from the size of a sliver to that of a finger.

"Okay, uh, ladies, when we get to the hangar bay—"

"We understand what to do, Captain," came the reply.

"You know where—"

"The projector and the backup," rasped the other sister. "And both at once, or the generatorz will reverse and send us tumbling out of control. We have studied our schematicz."

Han checked the systems display and saw that the sisters had already turned the *Falcon's* cannon turrets away in a gesture of submission. Thinking his plan just might work, he turned to finish his calculations. The new Commenor coordinates were already glowing on the display, along with those for the rendezvous Tesar had recommended instead.

"Both setz are accurate," the Barabel assured him. "The choice is yourz."

"Thanks."

The frigate was as long as his forearm now, and so brightly lit Han could see the cannon turrets mounted along its spine and belly. He transferred the Commenor coordinates to the navicomputer. Tesar's pupils narrowed, but he managed to keep his tongue from flicking—too much.

“Look, I trust you,” Han said. “But we’d just lead them straight to your rendezvous. There’s a homing beacon somewhere on this bird, and we can’t look for it until we land someplace.”

Tesar turned away, as though he was convinced Han was making excuses. “The beacon will be in something you brought aboard. We removed the one the docking officer planted in the strut.”

Han raised his brow. “You’ve been watching the *Falcon*?”

“Yes, since Jedi Waz realized who you were.” As he spoke, Tesar continued to look out the side of the canopy. “We, uh, discussed whether to tell you, but our Master’s instructionz were to remain hidden. She is not going to be pleased, especially when we miss the rendezvous.”

“Sorry to cause you trouble,” Han said. As large as a hovercar, the frigate filled the forward viewport. All six weapons turrets were turned in the *Falcon*’s direction, the barrels of their deadly laser cannons slowly depressing as their target drew near. “But I need to get Leia to a bacta tank. Eelysa, too; we only have a little while before that portable tank starts to pollute itself.”

Tesar turned from the canopy. “That is not an excuse?”

“Now, Captain?” interrupted one of the sisters. “Can we shoot now?”

There was nothing ahead but frigate, its massive hangar bay yawning open in the middle of the micropitted hull. A conical tractor beam projector hung down from the ceiling in obvious sight, but its ready backup was still tucked against the ceiling and barely visible.

“You can make both shots?” Han asked. “At once?”

“Of course,” the other sister said. “We are Jedi.”

Han checked the frigate’s weapons turrets—the two that he could still see—and found the cannon barrels still trained on the *Falcon*, not quite at maximum depression.

“Not yet.” He placed one hand on the throttles. “I’ll let you know.”

“The bacta tankz?” There was a rising note of urgency in Tesar’s voice. “They are the only reason, Han Solo?”

Han thought for a moment. Though it would have been more in a Barabel’s nature to demand—and demand only once—before simply taking control of the ship, Tesar had never even mentioned the possibility, not even as an argument proving his own trustworthiness. That was very Jedi.

Han nodded. “Yeah, the bacta tanks are the only reason.”

“Good.” Tesar was almost whispering now. “Then this one will tell you something else his Master would not wish. There will be bacta tankz at the rendezvous—and a safe place to use them.”

The frigate’s laser cannons reached their maximum depression, then disappeared out of sight behind the curve of the ship’s hull.

“Now, Captain?” a sister asked.

Han ignored her and asked Tesar, “How safe?”

“As safe as a nest in a ferrocrete den.”

They reached the entrance to the hangar bay. The lights outside the cockpit rippled as the frigate’s shields were lowered to admit the *Falcon*. Han hit the directional thrusters, and the ship began to tremble as it struggled to pivot in the tractor beam’s grasp. The cockpit passed into the bay.

“Now, ladies!”

The sisters were already bringing their turrets around. Given the vibrating ship, the precision timing, and the swift targeting, the shot would have been impossible for any typical pair of gunners. The two Barabels were not typical. In the same second, two volleys of laser bolts streaked out . . . and scorched holes through the opposite side of the bay.

Then the *Falcon* was pulled completely inside the frigate, and Han saw two little Vigilance starfighters—one hiding in each of the near corners—swinging their weapons in his direction. He brought the shields up, then another volley lashed out from his own laser cannons and hit the tractor beam projectors.

The bay walls spun past in a blur. Sheets of red flame washed over the cockpit canopy. Han thought the sisters had missed their timing, that the *Falcon* was tumbling out of control. A familiar whumpf reverberated through the cockpit, and blazing streaks of light lanced out from the cannon turrets to blossom against the walls in disks of fire. Han tipped the yoke against the spin and slowed the revolutions, then saw laser bolts stabbing starry darkness ahead and jammed the throttles.

He knew they had escaped by the laserfire suddenly webbing the darkness around them. Not bothering to check the tactical display—he knew the Y-wings and X-wings were coming—Han pushed the nose down and, corkscrewing wildly, transferred shield power aft.

“Okay, Tesar, give me our heading.”

The Barabel read off a set of familiar-sounding coordinates.

“Not those.” Han cleared the navicomputer and called up the second set. “The new ones. A ferrocrete den sounds good right now.”

The Barabel smiled, baring a set of teeth that could have stripped a rancor to the bone. “You will not regret this, Captain.”

The *Falcon* began to shake beneath the volleys of the frigate’s belly cannons.

“I won’t have time if you don’t hurry.”

Tesar gave him the new coordinates, and Han swung the *Falcon* onto the bearing. He was just about to make the jump to lightspeed when Leia’s voice came over the intercom.

“Han? Han I—”

“I’m sorry, Captain Solo,” C-3PO interrupted. “But she’s just awakened and insists she must speak with you this instant.”

“Han?” Leia’s voice was raspy and weak, and she sounded confused. “Han, I’m so thirsty. Could you bring me some water?”

Chapter 5

Though contaminants had long since fouled the monitoring electrodes and the bacta had turned so murky and green Eelysa could hardly be seen, Leia knew the Jedi Master had awakened. She could feel Eelysa inside the cramped tank, a strong presence in the Force, isolated from those around her, aware of her danger and curious about it, yet patient and calm and utterly at peace with her helplessness. Leia filled her heart with reassurance and reached out through the Force, and she felt the Barabels—Tesar Sebatyne and the Hara sisters, Bela and Krasov—do the same.

Eelysa held the contact for what might have been seconds or minutes, filling the Force with a sense of gratitude and love, then continued to embrace them as she sank into a Jedi healing trance. Leia and the Barabels remained with her until her thoughts and emotions grew as quiet as a pond on a windless day, then, one by one, gently withdrew.

When they were done, Leia was surprised to find that she herself felt stronger and more at peace than she had in a long time. It was by far the most intimate Force touch she had ever experienced, not because the Barabels were stronger than other Jedi, but because they shared themselves so freely and innocently. She saw now why Eelysa had taken it upon herself to train their Master—Tesar's mother, Saba Sebatyne—even when doing so had endangered her and her mission on Barab I.

"Leia?" Han asked. "You all right?"

"Fine, Han." She did not look at him as she answered, though only because he was changing her bandages and the last thing she wanted to see—

even to glimpse—was the blackened, oozing mass that was her legs. “But Eelysa . . . we have to do something.”

“Haven’t I been saying that?” Han grumbled.

They had arrived at the rendezvous point almost a full day earlier, then began a monotonous waiting game that had Han ready to push their passengers out an air lock. Though Izal Waz and the Barabels were at a loss to explain the delay, they kept assuring Han they would know if the meeting were canceled. It did not help matters that when Han asked how they would know, Izal always looked to the Barabels, and the Barabels just shrugged and said they would know.

Leia looked to Bela—or maybe it was Krasov—and said, “We need to comm your Master.” Though it was hard to envision ordering a Barabel to do anything, she spoke in the voice of command that she had used to such good effect during her tenure as the New Republic Chief of State. “Give us the transceiver address.”

The two sisters looked from each other to Tesar, then they simply seemed to come to an agreement.

“As you wish,” Krasov—or maybe Bela—said. “But if you use it, the rendezvous will be canceled. Master Saba has learned to be careful about Peace Brigade eavesdropperz.”

Tesar—who was both larger and darker than the females—shrugged. “But do what you think is best. She is already going to be displeased with us.”

“A lot of that going around,” Han said darkly.

Tesar’s shoulders sagged. “This one apologizes for his advice. You may blast him anytime.”

“Don’t tempt—”

Leia laid a silencing hand on her husband’s shoulder. “I’m sure Tesar is as worried about Eelysa as we are. She is his mother’s Master.”

The hardness that came to Han’s eyes was as surprising as it was subtle, but he nodded curtly and, without looking up, used synthflesh to secure the edge of a bactabandage. The adhesive wasn’t supposed to hurt, but it felt like fire against Leia’s inflamed skin.

Han lowered her foot onto the footrest, then gathered up the discarded bandages and stood. “Forget trying to reach Tesar’s mother.”

“Master Saba,” Krasov corrected.

Han ignored her and continued, "If it stops her from coming, that only makes our situation worse." He turned to Tesar. "How do you know your mother—Master Saba—is still coming?"

"Because we have not felt otherwise," Bela answered.

Han turned to Bela. "What does that mean, 'felt otherwise'?"

"Your mate understandz," Tesar replied, looking to Leia. "Through the Force."

"Then she must be very near," Leia said, unsure whether to be confused or impressed. "I know of only a few Jedi who can feel what others are doing, and even then they must be near one another."

Krasov shook her head. "Not like hatchmates."

"We feel nothing has happened to her," Bela added.

"I see." Leia's head was beginning to spin from the way the conversational thread roamed from one Barabel to another. "So you're saying you haven't felt her die?"

"And that's how you know the rendezvous is still on?" Han demanded. "Because Master Saba isn't dead yet?"

Tesar smiled broadly. "Exactly! If Master Saba isn't dead yet, she will be here."

Han's face grew stormy—alarmingly so, at least to Leia. "That's it." He stared at the floor for a moment, then turned to Leia. "We're going to Talfaglio."

"Talfaglio?" Leia waited for one of the Barabels to object. When none did, she asked, "Are you serious?"

"As a hungry Hutt," Han replied. "We can't risk waiting around here for bacta that might be coming someday."

He threw the soiled bandages down the disposal chute and started to leave. Leia's repulsor chair barely turned fast enough to keep him in view.

"Han, wait!" Leia made a point of staying where she was; once she started moving, she would find herself following him clear into the cockpit. "Let's think this through."

Han turned in the door. "What's to think through?" There was that hard look again—hardly unknown, but oddly out of place. "We need bacta."

"We do," Leia admitted. "But how long will it take to reach Talfaglio?"

"Ten and a half hours," Han said confidently. "I had Izal plot the course."

Leia glanced toward the portable tank. "We don't have ten hours. Eelysa will be dead in half that time."

“And you in twenty.”

“We don’t know that.”

“Well, I’m not taking chances.” Han turned and vanished through the door.

Leia hastened after him, but her chair was no match for his angry stride. He was already disappearing around the curve of the corridor as she floated out of the crew quarters, and by then she finally understood the hard look in his eye.

“Han!”

Han stopped, but did not turn.

“We can’t go.” Leia wondered if she still knew this man at all, if he could have been so hardened by Chewbacca’s death and the treachery of the Duros that he had truly become the selfish cynic he had fancied himself when they met. “We have to wait . . . and hope.”

“We have to get you to a bacta tank.” Han turned, his eyes filled with tears he refused to shed. “If we don’t, you may not walk again.”

“Then at least I won’t be walking on corpses.” Leia started her chair down the corridor. “Han, have you forgotten who I am? Do you think I want to walk at the cost of someone else’s life? Would you want me to?”

Han shook his head weakly. Then tears began to escape his eyes, and he hurried up the corridor. Leia did not follow. She still understood him well enough to know when to leave him alone. He could face no more loss, and Leia was coming to comprehend—or was it fear?—that when he looked at her in the repulsor chair, he saw another loss, something else taken by the Yuuzhan Vong.

And, Leia was astonished to realize, she saw the same thing in him. After Chewbacca’s death, he had shut himself off from his family and disappeared into the galaxy to grieve alone. She had believed he just needed room, and she had given it to him. But now she realized he had left for another reason as well, to shield her and the children from a fury he could not control. Would he have gone, she wondered, if she had tried harder to reach him, just kept pushing and weathered the storm when he finally unleashed his anger? Would he still feel like such a stranger now?

Deciding only a fool makes the same mistake twice, Leia started up the corridor. This time, she would not let him suffer in private.

“Ship incoming,” Izal Waz announced.

A vast sense of relief came over Leia, and not only because she knew the bacta had arrived. She steered her chair quickly into the main hold and was overtaken by the three Barabels, the two Hara sisters rushing for the cannon turrets and Tesar for the cockpit. She paused at the engineering station to send C-3PO to watch over Eelysa, then went to her new post behind the flight deck bulkhead. Han and Izal were already sitting in their chairs. Tesar loomed behind their seats, blocking Leia's view of almost everything.

"The transponder's on," Han said. "That's a good sign."

"The Star Roamer," Izal Waz reported. "Damorian medium freighter, armed. Registered to CorDuro Shipping."

"Out here?" Han asked. The rendezvous was taking place at the edge of the Corellian sector, in a never-to-be-surveyed system consisting of little more than a few asteroids, a dust ring, and the core of a collapsed star. "What's CorDuro doing in a place like this?"

"They are the ones we have been waiting for," Tesar explained. "That is where we are getting our bacta tankz."

"From CorDuro?" Leia asked, disappointed. At the least, CorDuro Shipping was guilty of appropriating supplies intended for refugees. "Master Saba has an arrangement with them?"

"Yes, but CorDuro does not know it yet." Tesar turned to face her, and a pinhead of crimson brightness—the collapsed star as seen from inside its dust ring—appeared outside the cockpit. "They will learn soon."

"Are you guys spacesick?" Han demanded. He looked from Tesar to Izal Waz. "You can't buy bacta tanks from CorDuro! They're collaborators. They might even be a front for the Peace Brigade."

Izal Waz shared a grin with Tesar, then asked, "Does anyone have proof of that?"

"Jacen sent a report to New Republic Intelligence," Leia said. "But it outlined a circumstantial case. There isn't anything solid."

Tesar sissed, then said, "There will be soon."

As Leia puzzled over the Barabel's remark, the CorDuro freighter slowed and entered an unconcealed orbit in the dust ring. A few minutes later, the proximity alarm sounded. Han silenced it and frowned at his display, but Izal merely activated the *Falcon's* data recorders.

"I'm getting nothing but mass readings." Han buckled his crash webbing. "That new ship's Yuuzhan Vong!"

Tesar sissed again, then looked back at Leia. “Not long now, this one thinkz.”

He moved aside to give her a better view of the displays. Leia smiled her thanks and started to palm her hold-out blaster—this could still be a trap—then decided against it and left the weapon in her sleeve. The Barabels’ insistence on total comm silence had prevented her from confirming even a small part of their story with Luke, but the feelings they had shared in the crew quarters had contained no hint of deception.

Han and Izal Waz quickly identified the Yuuzhan Vong vessel as a corvette-analog picket ship, then they all waited while the Star Roamer maneuvered into docking range.

“The Yuuzhan Vong want to know about bacta,” Tesar explained. “Before Master Eelysa was injured, she told Master Saba about this rendezvous.”

“And Master Saba decided you need a set of your own bacta tanks,” Han finished.

Tesar bared his fangs in a smile. “It seemed fair.”

“What if something goes wrong?” The worry in Han’s voice was so foreign to the Han Solo that Leia remembered that she thought for a moment someone else was speaking. “Eelysa’s the one who will pay the price.”

“And Leia, too, you’re thinking,” Izal Waz said.

“The thought had crossed my mind,” Han admitted.

Tesar covered Han’s shoulder with a black-scaled claw. “Han Solo, you worry too much. What could go wrong?”

Leia had to smile. “At least Jacen will feel better,” she said, trying to take Han’s mind off all the things that could go wrong. “His report was going nowhere without solid . . .”

Leia let the sentence trail off, for her thoughts were whirling through her mind like hawk-bats above a thermal exhaust vent. Why would someone contract an assassin to kill her? Why bribe a CorSec guard to steal her datapad? Why send an entire combat flotilla to prevent her from returning home?

“Proof!” she gasped. “Someone thinks I have proof.”

“Proof?” Han turned in the pilot’s seat. “Of CorSec’s collaboration?”

Leia nodded. “That’s what they’re afraid of.”

“It makes sense,” Han said. “Hard to be sure, though.”

“What else have I been doing over the last year?” Leia asked. “And no one was trying to kill me before Jacen’s report—at least no one on our side.”

“CorDuro’s not exactly on our side either, dear.”

Han opened a tactical feed to the navicomputer display so Leia could watch events unfold from her seat behind the bulkhead. A minute or so after the corvette and freighter had merged into a single blip, Izal Waz opened a subspace channel and announced the coordinates of the rendezvous.

“I thought we had to maintain comm silence,” Han said.

“Close enough,” Tesar said.

A few seconds later, a nervous voice came from the Star Roamer. “Who was that?” When no one answered, it said again, “Unidentified transmitter, respond and explain yourself.”

They did not, of course. A minute later, the electronics began to hiss and spit as the freighter went to active sensors and probed in their direction. Leia felt confident the *Falcon* would remain hidden. The asteroid they sat upon was only a few times larger than the ship itself, but Han had set them down beside a ten-meter pressure ridge where standard sensors would find it impossible to distinguish the ship’s silhouette.

The hissing faded away, and another minute passed. The tactical display went briefly blank as the asteroid’s rotation hid the two ships from view, then it turned to static as the sensors pointed toward the tiny sun. When the static cleared, the Roamer and the Yuuzhan Vong corvette were separate blips again.

Tesar hissed in frustration. “They will get—”

He was interrupted by the shriek of proximity alarms. A new handful of blips appeared on the display, streaking in from five sides, already firing laser bolts and even a couple of long-range proton torpedoes. The Yuuzhan Vong turned to meet the assault, as Yuuzhan Vong ships nearly always did. The Roamer ran in the only direction left to it, toward the *Falcon*.

Han and Izal began a warm start-up, while Leia occupied herself trying to guess whether they would intercept the freighter before it jumped to hyperspace. Identifiers began to appear beneath the blips on the tactical display, revealing a motley assortment of old T-65 X-wings, even older Y-wings, and a pair of Skipray blastboats. Some of the newcomers’ transponder codes were already blinking to show damage, and the Yuuzhan Vong had not even fired.

"That's the saddest pirate band I've seen in some time," Leia said. "Who did Master Saba hire for this assignment?"

"No one. That is our squadron, the Wild Knightz." Tesar smiled proudly. "I fly a very fine Y-wing."

Any need to apologize was forestalled by a proximity alarm. Another vessel, this one a fast-freight tagged the Jolly Man, emerged from hyperspace to block the Roamer's line of escape. The CorDuro ship continued on course and began to fire, lacing the darkness outside with tiny needles of light. A trio of ancient Z-95 Headhunters dropped out of the Jolly Man's belly and moved to meet it. The Roamer started to turn away—then suddenly changed its mind and ran toward the tiny sun.

"He's going down the gravity well! On a white dwarf!" Han engaged the ion drives—still a little cold—and launched the *Falcon*. "He must be crazy."

"No," Tesar said. "He is frightened."

The reason grew apparent an instant later, when a blip in hot pursuit emerged from behind an asteroid. A tag naming the vessel the Sureshot appeared, along with a legend identifying it as a CEC YT-1300 stock light freighter—the same ship as the *Falcon*.

"She's not as fast as the *Falcon*," Izal Waz said proudly. "But . . . well, she still flies."

The Roamer quickly started to pull away from the Sureshot, but its abrupt change of direction had given the Jolly Man's Headhunters time to catch up. They took a few passes, taking out the energy shields and forcing the captain to waste time maneuvering or have a hole burned through his bridge. Finally, the Sureshot activated its tractor beam and caught hold of the target.

The Roamer stopped maneuvering and continued to accelerate, firing at the Sureshot and dragging the smaller freighter after it. The Headhunters took care of the cannon fire in two passes, but they could not target the drive nacelles without getting caught in the tractor beam. The Sureshot turned ninety degrees in an attempt to change vector, but the course did not vary noticeably. Its engines could not match the combination of the larger freighter's power and the white dwarf's gravity.

"Smart," Leia said. "He's giving the Sureshot a choice—release or be dragged into the sun."

"Tesar," Han said, "how long before they reach the point of no return?"

Tesar had already done the calculations. "Ten minutes," he said. "We will reach tractor range in five."

Han opened a comm channel. "Hold tight, Sureshot. Help's on the way."

"Just don't be all day about it," came the reply.

Leia spent the next few minutes scarcely breathing as the *Falcon* closed. The Headhunters continued to harry the Roamer, though it was just harassment and everyone knew it. On Leia's recommendation, they opened a channel to the captain and promised to broker a lenient sentence in return for cooperating with New Republic Intelligence. The captain responded by promising not to drag the Sureshot into the sun in return for shutting off the tractor beam, then closed the channel. Izal Waz suggested offering the crew freedom in exchange for the bacta tanks, but Leia overruled that idea. If the captain knew what they were really after, there was a good chance he would destroy the tanks out of vindictiveness.

So they waited and watched on the tactical display as the other two flights of Wild Knights used the Yuuzhan Vong picket ship for target practice. Though the vessel was hurling an amazing amount of plasma and magma into space, the ancient starfighters always seemed to be where the enemy attacks weren't, or to angle their shields at just the right time, or to take the Yuuzhan Vong gunners by surprise. The corvette analog disintegrated bit by bit, slowly at first, then more rapidly, and finally it simply flew apart and became indistinguishable from the dust ring.

Han whistled. "Where were they when the Yuuzhan Vong attacked Ithor? The New Republic could use a few more pilots like those."

"This one does not think Master Luke would have approved," Tesar said. "We are given to understand he does not want the Jedi to hunt as soldierz."

"You're all Jedi?" Leia asked.

"All of the pilotz, yes."

The blocky silhouette of a Damorian freighter eclipsed the tiny sun ahead, its glowing ion drives sliding across the cockpit canopy as Han brought the *Falcon* in behind it. The smaller disk of a YT-1300 appeared below them and a little off to one side, its back painted in a patternless kaleidoscope of the primary colors so favored by the Arcona. The Headhunters were barely visible, a trio of tiny black crosses chasing the bolts of their laser cannons up the Roamer's half-kilometer hull.

Han spoke over the intercom. "Ladies, we're counting on you to take out the drive nacelles. Izal, why don't you handle the tractor beam?"

“On my way.”

The Arcona unbuckled his harness and rose. The mere sight of the massive hull ahead was enough to convince Leia they could not change its vector in time.

“Han,” she said, “this isn’t the way to do it.”

Han half turned in his seat. “I’m listening.”

“Won’t there be an escape hatch above the bridge?”

“Yeah—locked from the inside,” Han said.

“Doesn’t matter,” Leia said. “We have Jedi.”

Han frowned. “The CorDuro crew will be waiting.”

“So?” Tesar asked. “We have Jedi.”

For some reason even Izal Waz did not seem to understand; this sent Tesar into a fit of sissing. Leia waved the back of her fingers at Han.

“We have five minutes,” she said. “I can handle the cofferdam.”

“Four and a half minutes,” Izal Waz corrected, stepping to the back of the flight deck.

“Two will do.” Tesar began to siss again. “We have Jedi.”

“Right.” Han drew his blaster and passed it to Leia. “I just hope we still have Jedi when this is done.”

Leia led the way to the port docking ring, where Bela and Krasov were already waiting in their brown Jedi robes. They were a terrifying contrast to Izal Waz, who if the truth was told, looked rather comical in his ragged flight tabard.

Han set the *Falcon* on edge and brought it into position over the docking ring. The Roamer attempted to slide out from under them, but Han was too good a pilot to let such a cumbersome ship outmaneuver him. Leia put the cofferdam over the docking ring on the third try, then activated the magnetic clamp and pressurized the passage.

“Three minutes,” Han warned. “If you can’t—”

Tesar opened the hatch—and promptly hissed as a blaster bolt caught him in the shoulder. From her chair, Leia glimpsed a charging crew member in a CorDuro uniform and squeezed off two shots, then the two Hara sisters were leaping through door with lit lightsabers. The human gurgled and thumped to the floor. A pair of blaster rifles opened up from the opposite hatch. The tunnel filled with flashes and hums and zings for about two seconds, then the sounds began to recede as the Barabels carried the battle into the Roamer.

Izal Waz followed, stepping over two bodies in the cofferdam and kicking another out of the way as he boarded the freighter. Tesar was slower to react, pulling the cloth away from his shoulder to reveal the smoking hole and scorched scales beneath.

Leia moved her chair forward. "Tesar, how bad?"

"Bad," he growled. "My best robe." He stuck a claw through the hole. "This really burnz me."

Then, sissing with hilarity, he leapt through the hatch and followed his companions into the Star Roamer.

Leia stared after him in dumbfounded silence. When the hatch at the other end of the cofferdam closed, she sealed the *Falcon's* hatch and withdrew the cofferdam, then checked her chronometer.

Two minutes.

She activated the intercom. "Han, we're clear. Maybe we can buy a little time if we use the—"

"Don't need to," Han replied. "The Roamer has cut her throttles and is turning outbound."

"They're surrendering?" Leia asked. "Good. Maybe now we can find out who wants me dead."

"Uh, maybe not," Han said. "They're not exactly surrendering."

"Not exactly surrendering?" Leia double-checked the hatch seal, then started for the main hold. "What are you talking about?"

"Sensors are showing two escape pod deployments."

"Here?"

Leia reached the main hold and went straight to the engineering station, where she saw the image of two escape pods arcing away from the Star Roamer. At escape pod speeds, it would have taken them over three years to reach the nearest habitable environment. But that was not going to be a problem. From the way it looked to Leia, both pods were already well down the white dwarf's gravity well.

Izal Waz's breathless voice came over the speaker. "Star Roamer secure," he said. "With enough bacta to fill a lake."

"Izal," Leia asked, patching through the intercom. "What about the crew?"

"You mean survivors?"

"Yes, survivors," Leia said.

There was a moment of silence, then Izal Waz's voice fell to a whisper.
“Well, what would you do if you saw three angry Barabels coming your way?”

Chapter 6

Impossible as it was to ignore the stunning cascade of liquid metal outside the transparisteel walls of the Cinnabar Moon Retreat, Han tried. He sat in the natatorium of the abandoned spa the Wild Knights were using as a base, trying to concentrate on the two datapads before him, listening to Leia's leg braces whir and clunk as she walked circuits around the empty pool. C-3PO was standing behind the covered bar, using a portable HoloNet hookup to access databases across the galaxy and add yet more entries to the catalog Han was studying. It was maddening work, if only because CorDuro had so many employees, and so many of them had at one time or another been affiliated with illicit organizations. Han wondered what his own dossier would have looked like in this light, or even Leia's. Smugglers, insurrectionists, Hutt-killers . . .

The name of a woman who had once served as a clerk in Thrackan Sal-Solo's Human League appeared on a display. Han transferred it to the scrutiny list on the second datapad, then used a electronic stylus to bring up the next entry. Somewhere on this list he would find someone who knew Roxi Barl, and that would give him a thread he could follow to the person who wanted his wife dead. Or so he hoped. In the week since their capture of the *Star Roamer*, it was the best plan they had devised, and time was running out to develop a new one. The Wild Knights had spotted a mysterious task force sniffing around a nearby system; like the flotilla that had jumped the *Falcon* outside Corellia, this one operated with deactivated transponders and included Lancer-class customs frigates.

Leia's clunking grew louder. Han looked up to see her approaching, arms swinging wide to balance the cybernetic exercise braces that kept her legs from collapsing.

"That's all." She stopped in front of her repulsor chair and turned her back toward it, arms extended for Han to take when he lowered her into the seat. "These braces still aren't adjusted. I can't even cock my ankle."

"Give it some time." Han did not rise. Leia had only completed six of the twenty-five laps that Cilghal—the Jedi's most accomplished healer—had prescribed, and today was the first day she had gone beyond four laps. "You just need to get used to them."

"Thanks for your opinion, Dr. Solo," Leia said dryly. She continued to stand with her arms out. "Now, would you please help me into my chair and take these things off?"

Han slapped the stylus on the table. "Sure."

Though thrice-daily bacta treatments had finally chased the infection from Leia's legs, it seemed to Han another infection had been festering in a place bacta could not reach. There was a sadness in her that had been growing since Corellia. Any effort to encourage her invariably met a sharp-tongued riposte, any bid to urge her on only resulted in a sullen retreat. This was not the Leia he had married all those years ago, before . . . well, before he had gone crazy and shut her out. She had Leia's face and voice and body and even her wit, but she held herself apart now; it was as though the Yuuzhan Vong had taken Leia away from him without even killing her, and now he wanted her back.

"Han?" Leia was suspended halfway above the seat of the repulsor chair, her arms still clasped in his grasp. "Are you going to keep me hanging here?"

"No." Han hauled her to her feet, then took her arm and pulled her two steps toward the pool. "Let's do a couple of circuits together. If something's out of alignment, maybe I'll see it."

"If, Han?" Leia pulled her arm free. "Wouldn't I be the one who could tell?"

Han sighed. "Look, maybe they're uncomfortable, but there are only so many adjustments. I've tried them all."

Leia narrowed her eyes. "So I don't know what I'm talking about?"

"I'm saying give them more time." Han took her arm again. "Come on, just a couple more circuits."

“Are you listening?” Leia refused to move her feet, and Han had to stop pulling or drag her over. “It hurts. I can’t do any more today.”

C-3PO looked up at the sound of Leia’s sharp voice and started to say something, then wisely decided his assistance was not needed.

“You mean won’t,” Han said.

“All right, won’t.” Leia clunked the two steps back to her chair. “What’s the difference? Either way, you’re helping me into that chair and out of these braces. If you can’t do that—”

“That I can do,” Han said, surrendering to his exasperation. “I can put you in and out of this chair for the rest of your life, if that’s what you want. What I can’t do is make those braces comfortable, so you’ll just have to take the pain and keep going. When that task force of killers finally finds us—and they will find us—it might be nice if you could actually run for cover.”

“That’s fine advice, coming from you,” Leia said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You can figure it out,” Leia said. “After Chewbacca died, you certainly ran. And you kept running, farther and farther—”

Leia stopped and looked away, and Han finally understood that they weren’t arguing about cybernetic braces, or how many circuits Leia made of the pool, or even how much she really wanted to walk again.

Leia shook her head. “This won’t get us anywhere. Let’s just drop it.”

“No, go ahead,” Han replied. “It’s time you said it.”

Leia continued to look away. “I didn’t mean anything—”

“Yes, you did.” Han spoke with a humility hard-earned over the last year. “The truth is, I might have made a few mistakes in the way I handled things.”

Now Leia looked at him, her eyes as round as sensor dishes. “I suppose you might have,” she said cautiously. “But you needed to grieve.”

“Yeah, and maybe I even needed to go help Droma find his clan. What I didn’t need to do was concussion-bomb our family.” Han was quiet for a moment, then—forcing himself not to look away—he said, “Leia, I’m sorry.”

Leia’s eyes brightened with tears. She held his gaze for a moment, then clunked forward. Han reached for her hands, but she surprised him by wrapping her arms around his waist and pressing her cheek against his chest.

“Me, too,” she said. “I’m sorry, too. All these years, I’ve devoted myself to the New Republic and asked you and the children to sacrifice so much.”

“Hey, this is my apology.” Han took her by shoulders. “And what you did for the New Republic is important.”

“It is—but I had a part in letting this happen,” Leia said. “Without you around, it became very clear that I haven’t exactly been the glue that holds this family together.”

“Your hands were pretty full trying to hold the galaxy together.” Han did not like where this was going; blaming herself for their family problems was not going to make Leia work harder in her braces. “I couldn’t have picked a worse time to leave you on your own.”

“Haven’t my hands always been full? That’s the point. All these years, I think I’ve been trying to rebuild what I lost when Alderaan was destroyed.” Leia placed her fingers over his heart. “I couldn’t see that I already had it—here with you and the children.”

Han was speechless. These days, even his apologies ricocheted.

“If we hadn’t found each other on Duro when we did,” Leia continued, “I would have died alone—a stranger to my own family.”

Han wanted to say that wasn’t true, or she couldn’t know what might have happened, or that the Force had brought them back to each other. But all that sounded somehow hollow and not what Leia needed to hear. He needed to give her a jolt, to make her see that they had come through it, if only she would open her heart and eyes and see it.

“You know who you remind me of?” he asked. “Borsk Fey’lya, claiming all the credit for himself.”

Leia’s jaw dropped. “Borsk Fey’lya! How dare . . .” She must have seen the mischief in Han’s face, because she let the sentence trail off and scowled. A hint of the old spark returned to her eye, and she gave him a sideways look. “Borsk! Not really?”

Han half smiled. “Really. You’re taking way too much of this on yourself. You’d have had to chase me across half the galaxy—and drag me out of a thousand tapcafs.”

Leia pondered this, then said, “You know, I am being too hard on myself.” She seemed to shed two years of worry lines in as many seconds, then added, “As you say, you’re the one who shut me out. What was I supposed to do, slap a set of stun cuffs on you and borrow an interrogator droid from NRI?”

“Of course not,” Han said, beginning to wonder who was toying with whom. “But like you said, we both played our parts—”

“No, when you’re right you’re right. I’m not going to argue.” Leia’s smile—not quite a victory smirk—turned as hard as durasteel. “But you’re never doing that again, Han. The next time you need help, you won’t escape.”

Han felt like the spa’s supplemental gravity inducers had reset themselves. He had flutters in his stomach and bells in his ears, and he even felt a little weak in the knees. This was the Leia he remembered. She took his shirt collar and, unable to rise on her toes, began to pull him down so she could kiss him.

“Not so fast.” Han disengaged himself and retreated to the edge of the empty pool. “If you want to do that, you come over here.”

Leia raised her brow. “You’re going to make me work for this?” She looked him up and down, then finally clanked after him. “It had better be good.”

Han gave her his finest smirk. “Oh, it’ll be good.” He waited until she was almost to him, then began to retreat along the pool’s edge toward C-3PO. “Just the way you remember.”

“The way I remember?” Leia echoed. “Taking a lot for granted, aren’t you?”

They were interrupted by an excited cry from C-3PO. “I’ve found something!” He transferred an entry to one of the datapads Han was using, then said, “CorDuro’s vice president of fleets is related to Roxi Barl by marriage, and he has a substantial equity interest in the Kuat Drive Yards corporation.”

Han rushed toward the table—then heard Leia struggling to keep up and went back to walk with her.

“How substantial?” Leia asked.

“Almost a thousandth of a percent,” C-3PO reported. “Current value well over a hundred million credits.”

Han whistled and picked up the datapad, turning it so both he and Leia could see. They made it almost to the end of the first screen before the problem grew apparent. The vice president of fleets had died several months earlier under mysterious circumstances, shortly after he petitioned to divorce Roxi’s sister.

“Oh dear,” C-3PO said. “I don’t see how it could be him.”

“I don’t think it ever could have been,” Leia said. “We have an entire task force hunting us. This guy didn’t have the resources to buy that kind of

influence. We need somebody with government pull on a world that uses those Lancer-class customs frigates—a lot of pull. You don't send an anonymous task force after the *Millennium Falcon* on a flotilla commander's say-so."

"Or maybe you need somebody in the government," Han said. He sat down and began an associates search. "Threepio, get everything you can on Viqu Shesh. I think we've been coming at this from the wrong end."

"Senator Viqu Shesh?" Leia didn't sound all that surprised, just cautious. "What makes you think of her?"

"Lancer-class frigates and A-9 Vigilances," Han said. "They're manufactured on Kuat, and that first frigate captain had a Kuati accent."

"Interesting," Leia said. "And we know she has ties to CorDuro. But that doesn't mean she's the one."

"Maybe it doesn't," Han said. "But I know what would."

He began to compose a message to Luke.

Leia stood behind him and laid a hand on his shoulder. "No, don't ask if Viqu has been making inquiries about my whereabouts. Ask if anyone has."

Han finished the message, coded it, and transferred it to C-3PO for transmission. They received a reply three days later, informing them that there was an inquiry, but it didn't come from Shesh. Her chief of staff had been trying to track down Leia's whereabouts since the fall of Duro, haranguing New Republic Intelligence and SELCORE both on the pretense of being concerned for her safety. He had even shown up at their apartment—where he had learned absolutely nothing from the two Noghri bodyguards who had arrived to replace the pair killed on Duro. It was not quite a smoking blaster, but close enough that both Solos felt sure they had identified the person behind the assaults.

Given the evidence they had already recorded showing CorDuro's treason, Han and C-3PO spent the next few days trying in vain to establish a solid link between Viqu Shesh and the corporation. The most they could prove, at least from the data banks accessible over the HoloNet, was that she had had the bad judgment to assign all SELCORE shipping to a collaborationist corporation.

Leia contributed what she could—mostly ideas—but spent her time either in bacta tanks or clanging around the empty pool in her cybernetic exercise braces. By the end of the week, she could do fifty circuits, but her legs ached constantly, and she was no closer to making them obey. When

she sent a message to Cilghal reporting uncontrollable tremors, a reply came back telling Leia to find a nervesplicer as quickly as possible. The interruption in her bacta therapy had likely caused the nerves to regrow incorrectly, and every day she delayed in having the damage repaired increased the likelihood she would never walk properly again.

Leia and Han were in their quarters researching worlds with good nervesplacers—so far just Balmorra, Kuat, and Coruscant itself—when the door chime rang. It took C-3PO a full half a standard minute to circle the gurgling fountain in the center of the room and open the door.

“Mistress Eelysa, what a pleasant surprise!” he said.

Leia turned her repulsor chair to see Eelysa’s slender figure emerging from the opulent foyer, her dark hair hanging loosely over the shoulders of her jumpsuit. In her hand, she held one of the saber-toothed rodents that seemed to have taken over the spa since its abandonment—at least judging by the number of the creatures the Solos kept finding outside their suite. Though both Leia and Han had seen Eelysa many times since she emerged from the bacta tank, this was the first time she had visited them in their quarters, and her green eyes roamed over the milkstone walls, magnificent archways, and soaring cupola above the fountain.

“And I thought my room was nice,” Eelysa said.

“Apparently, Izal felt we would be more at home in the bridal suite,” Leia explained. She gestured at the carcass in Eelysa’s hand. “See-Threepio will dispose of that. We keep finding them in the hall.”

C-3PO reached for the rodent, but Eelysa pulled it away and tried—unsuccessfully—to keep from smiling as she used the Force to close the door.

“Actually, that’s one of the reasons I came.” She went into the kitchen and, talking over her shoulder, called, “The Barabels are starting to complain about your ingratitude.”

Han frowned. “Our ingratitude?”

Eelysa emerged from the kitchen drying her hands. “The carcasses are honor-gifts from Tesar and the Hara sisters,” she explained. “But don’t thank them, or they’ll think you want more.”

She pulled a holocube from her pocket. “This message came in over the HoloNet. Saba asked me to give it to you before I go.”

“You’re part of the advance team?” Leia asked. The mysterious task force had begun to sniff around the adjacent system, so the Wild Knights would

be changing bases as soon as she and Han departed. "Are you ready for that?"

Eelysa thumped her chest. "As good as new, but I'm not going to the new base. I'm on my way back to Corellia."

Han looked concerned—he looked that way a lot these days. "Will you be safe?"

"As safe there as anyplace," Eelysa answered. "And somebody needs to keep an eye on the Centerpoint Party. If they find some way to get the station going again, there's no telling what Thrackan will blow up."

"Himself, if we're lucky," Han said. He stood and reached out to shake her hand. "Watch yourself."

Eelysa ignored the hand and embraced him. "Thanks again. I don't know that Izal and the Barabels would have gotten me out of there without you."

"Without me, I don't know that they would've needed to," Han said, sitting back down. "But it was good seeing you again."

Eelysa bent down to hug Leia as well. "I'll be thinking of you. Get better."

"I already am," Leia said. "Be careful. Don't take foolish risks."

"Me?" Eelysa jerked a thumb at Han. "You're the one flying with Han Solo."

Leia waited until C-3PO had shown Eelysa out, then activated the holocube. It played a brief vidnews item describing a new movement in the Senate pushing for an Appeasement Vote to outlaw the Jedi and accept the truce terms put forward by Warmaster Tsavong Lah. Though the sponsors were identified as a coalition of Senators from uncaptured Core worlds, Luke's image appeared after the report to say that the leader was Viqu Shesh. She had already struck a deal with Borsk Fey'lya to call a vote the following week, so Luke was asking them to send him any information they could about her dealings with CorDuro. He also warned them that Shesh's chief of staff had quietly arranged to be notified the instant NRI learned their location.

Luke was still signing off when Leia threw the cube into the wall. "That woman is poison. Killing me isn't enough—now she has to go after all the Jedi!"

Han looked from Leia to the shattered cube. "She's murder on holocubes, that's for sure—not that we've got anything worth putting on one."

“She’s corrupt. We know it,” Leia said. “The only question is how corrupt.”

“Does it matter?” Han asked. “We can’t prove it. Short of assassination, there’s no way we’re going to stop her from calling the Appeasement Vote.”

“Assassination?” Leia leaned across the arm of her chair and kissed him. They had been doing a lot of that lately. “Han, you’re a genius.”

Han looked worried. “Maybe . . . do you really think we could pull it off?”

“Not physical assassination,” Leia said. “Political assassination. We’re going to attack her character.”

Now Han merely looked confused. “Leia, she’s from Kuat. Nobody expects her to have any character.”

“Which is why this will work,” Leia said. “And it’s time we carried the hunt to Viqu Shesh for a change. It’s the only way we’re going to win this thing.”

“I’m all for winning,” Han agreed. “But with what we’ve got so far, I don’t see it happening anytime soon.”

“Then, my dear, you need to broaden your definition of winning.” Leia patted his cheek, then turned to C-3PO, who was already approaching the shattered cube with a sweeper, and said, “Bring me a datapad. And get me the transceiver address for Senator Kvarm Jia. I need him to convene a corruption panel.”

“Without good evidence?” A knavish smile came to Han’s lips. “I didn’t think you played dirty.”

“I’ll make an exception,” Leia said. “This woman’s trying to outlaw my children.”

Chapter 7

The black drop of a battered CEC YT-1300 light freighter swung into view outside the viewport, the efflux from its dilapidated ion drives flickering uncertainly against the dazzle of Coruscant's night side. Though hardly the steady blue blast of his own ship's overpowered sublight engines, Han doubted the wavering would give them away. The *Falcon's* temperamental nature was too well known—and the possibility that she had taken battle damage on the journey home too high—for the contrast to draw more than a passing curiosity about what was wrong this time.

The cannon turrets were another story. Fabricated on the Cinnabar Moon from a pair of abandoned escape pods, they were not going to fool anyone who took a good look—especially if that person expected the support posts serving as cannon barrels to swivel around and start firing.

Han looked toward the front of the Jolly Man's spacious crew deck, where Izal Waz sat at a communications station using a slave unit to fly the Sureshot onto Coruscant. "You're sure you want to do this?"

"You suddenly think of a better way to spring their trap?" the Arcona asked.

Han shook his head. "There isn't one."

"Then stop asking." Izal kept his attention focused on the systems display ahead of him, relying on computer keys and a pressure pad to control his battered ship. "She's a piece of Jawa bait anyway."

The faint scent of ammonia permeated the air, and one of the milky bubbles that served Arcona as tears appeared in the corner of Izal's eye. Leia, magnoclamped to the deck next to Han's seat, cocked a brow and thumbed

her fingers as though activating a credit chip. Han shook his head no. A wreck like the Sureshot wasn't worth much, but there were some things no amount of money could replace.

"Thanks, Izal," Han said. "If you ever need anything from us, let us know."

"You're doing it," Izal said. "Just stop this Shesh woman and her Appeasement Vote."

A pair of Rendili light cruisers—on-station in Coruscant's innermost patrol perimeter—drifted past the viewport, then the Jolly Man entered a controlled-access area and had to slow as inbound vessels were herded into narrow approach bands. Above and below these bands, dozens of New Republic frigates were lacing the darkness with rocket fire as they set a shell of orbiting space mines.

As the traffic flow coagulated, Han and the three Barabels—crouched on the edges of their seats rasping in awe at Coruscant's scintillating brightness—kept a close watch. If Shesh's assassins were going to take the bait, this would be the logical place to stage an accident, but the Sureshot—flying under the *Falcon* alias Shadow Bird—passed through the mine shell unmolested. A few minutes later, crescents of sunlight started to reflect off the bottoms of orbital gun platforms. The traffic began to disperse as vessels fanned out toward their docking facilities.

The Sureshot and Jolly Man descended into low orbit. The Sureshot began to drift across Han's viewport as it turned toward the Eastport Docking Facility, where the Solos kept a berth under an assumed name.

Finally, a collision alarm sounded from Izal Waz's slave controls.

"Izal?" Han asked. He kept his gaze fixed out the viewport, but could see nothing moving toward the Sureshot. "I don't see anything."

"Something small." Izal punched a button to activate the Sureshot's distress alarm, and the electronic tones of an all-channels emergency beacon drifted down from the bridge speakers. "I think it came from—"

The Sureshot became an orange ball, hurling oddly shaped silhouettes and still-glowing drive nacelles in all directions. Even the Barabels gasped, and the comm channels erupted into inquiries and exclamations. Han turned toward Izal Waz and found the Arcona pushed back from his station, wiping the bubbles from his eyes.

"A rescue ship," Izal said. "It came underneath and ejected something."

A wedge of broken sensor dish glanced off the particle shields outside Han's viewport, drawing an involuntary recoil—and a chorus of sissing from the Barabels.

"Very funny," Han said. "I'll bet you guys wouldn't flinch in a meteor storm."

More debris began bouncing off the Jolly Man's shields, and the freighter started to slow. The captain patched a comm channel through the intercom.

". . . mine spill," an official voice was saying. "Cut speed to dead stop, and we'll tractor you out. Repeat, dead stop."

"In a Sarlacc's eye," Leia scoffed. She turned to Han. "Could they have seen through our decoy?"

Han shook his head. "The mine would've hit us," he said. "They're just trying to figure the Jolly Man. They might have been watching for a while, or maybe they picked up some of Izal's signal traffic."

"What do you think?" the Jolly Man's captain asked over the intercom. "Should I call in our backup?"

"No, we don't want Viqi to know her assassins failed," Leia looked over at Han, then added, "We can still pull this off."

Han raised his brow, then rose and, waving Leia toward the back of the ship, told the captain, "Just keep your launching bay in the Jolly's sensor shadow."

The Barabels' slit pupils widened to diamonds, and Izal Waz gasped, "You two are getting out here?"

In the Jolly Man's makeshift docking bay, the freighter's normal complement of primitive starfighters had been replaced by two dozen twin-pod cloud cars. Long ago converted for civilian tours on the Cinnabar Moon, they were a cargo far less likely to draw unwanted attention from Coruscant customs. Han opened the canopy of the vehicle he would fly. The backseat had already been removed, so Tesar used the Force to deposit Leia—chair and all—in the passenger compartment facing aft.

C-3PO came clunking into the hold. "Captain Solo, Mistress Leia, wait! You're forgetting me!"

"Sorry, Threepio," Leia said. "You'll have to stay with Izal and the Barabels until they can send you home."

"Stay?" C-3PO regarded the Barabels for a moment, then asked, "Are you quite sure there's no room?"

"You're a little large for the trunk," Han said.

He floated the cloud car out into the launching bay and shut down all non-life-support systems to lower their sensor profile. Then, with Izal and the Barabels waving good-bye through the observation port, he and Leia watched nervously as the outer hatch opened.

The cloud car lurched sharply as one of the Jedi used the Force to launch it from the bay. There was just enough time to be overwhelmed by the immensity of space compared to the tiny cockpit—and to wonder how much more vast the darkness must have seemed to Jaina when she went EV at Kalarba—before one of the Barabels reached out again. The cloud car began to tumble like an ordinary piece of space flotsam.

“Oh—nice touch,” Leia said. “I think I’m going to be sick.”

Fighting to keep his gaze fixed on the Jolly Man—and his own stomach down—Han alternated between trying not to watch Coruscant’s sparkling surface slide by and trying not to notice the stars swirling past in ever-widening spirals. Tails of ion efflux appeared and disappeared at random. Once, the tiny halo of an approaching vessel swelled into the backlit silhouette of a New Republic frigate. It vanished beneath the floor of the spinning cloud car and reappeared an instant later, less than a kilometer overhead and veering sharply away.

At last, the Jolly Man’s blocky silhouette disappeared over Coruscant’s horizon. Han waited a few more minutes, then fired the attitude thrusters to stabilize their tumble. Shaken by their close call with the frigate—and all too aware that being bounced off a particle shield would demolish their little craft—he activated the transponder next, and then the navigation systems.

It was at about that time Leia asked, “Why do I doubt those rescue launches are coming to help?”

Not waiting for the traffic display to come on-line, Han pushed their nose down and fired the cloud car’s little ion drive. They streaked out of orbit like a meteor and began to buck and burn in the thickening atmosphere. Finally, he had time to glance at the jiggling screen. A pair of rescue launch symbols sat almost atop their own. Farther away, the Jolly Man was turning away from Coruscant, a quartet of Cinnabar Moon cloud cars rushing back to its launching bay. Behind them tumbled the blinking codes of nearly a dozen damaged rescue launches. The rescue ship itself was nowhere to be seen.

Han opened a private channel to the Jolly Man. “You guys okay back there?”

"Of course," sissed a Barabel—Han thought it was Bela. "But one of those spilled mines changed course and struck the rescue ship, and the debris field has been very hard on her launchers. Only two escaped."

"No need to worry about those," Leia said. "We have them in sight. Have a safe journey home."

"We will," Izal Waz said. "We're clear of danger now. May the . . . well, you know."

"We do, and the same to you," Leia said. "Thank you again, and send C-3PO back when you get a chance."

Han continued to accelerate until the hull temperature warning light came on—then went faster. The first towers appeared far below, their spires jutting through the clouds like spikes through a bed. The rescue launches began to drift back. Han thought they might be losing nerve—until they brought their tractor beams on-line. He began to juke and jink like a fighter pilot.

The voice of a startled approach-control officer came over the comm speaker. "Cinnabar Moon cloud car five-three, what is the nature of your damage?"

"Damage?" Han said.

"From the mine spill," Leia whispered over the seat. "He thinks we were hit."

"Uh, no damage," Han commed. "We're fine."

"Then slow down!"

Han checked the traffic display. "Negative, Control."

There was a puzzled silence, then a disbelieving supervisor growled, "Negative?"

"This is an emergency," Han said. "My wife is, uh, having a baby."

"Whaaaaat?" Leia managed to modulate her startled outburst into something resembling a scream. "It's coming!"

"We can confirm that." The voice was so gravelly it might have been human or Aqualish. "We been escortin' 'em."

"Very well, cloud car," the supervisor said. "We'll clear a direct lane to Lamoramora Medcenter. Please follow the beacon on your traffic display . . . and slow down. You have the time to arrive in one piece."

"Like you'd know!" Leia snapped, playing her role. "Ronto brain!"

A deep chuckle came over the channel. A winking safety beacon flashed past as they reached the towertops and dived into the clouds. Han shifted

to instrument-flying and found himself plummeting through a canyon of display lines. A blue bar illuminated the route to Lamoramora, but the hoverlane was too narrow for maneuvering. Han swung into a broader skylane and circled an ancient cylindrical tower he could see only on his screen.

"Not going to lose them that way," Leia reported. "If I can see them, they can see us."

"You can see them in this?" Han did not dare glance up from his instruments, but he suspected he could not have seen five meters beyond the cloud car's nose. "How close are they?"

"Close." Leia's voice assumed the eerie calm that meant things were really bad. "Close enough to—"

Lines of blaster bolts started to flash past.

Control's angry voice squawked over the comm channel. Han slapped the unit off, then dropped out of the clouds through a crowded hoverlane, tipped the cloud car on its side, and ducked around a corner into oncoming traffic. Hovercars went everywhere. Han picked his way up to an emergency access level.

"Are the launches still back—"

The crackle of melting canopy told him they were.

"You all right?"

"Define all right." Leia had to yell to make herself heard over the rush of air. "I'm staring down the barrels of two blaster rifles, and I've got nothing but spit to fight back with."

Han dived for the dark underlevels, buying enough time to pull his blaster. He pushed it over the seat into Leia's hands, then the launches were on them again. Another bolt hit the canopy. The plasteel shattered. The wind filled Han's eyes with tears, and his blaster began to screech.

"Han, do something." That calm voice again.

"Can't see!"

Han squinted and thought he saw a bridge below. No, a roof! He leveled off and shot along a few meters above its surface, weaving through exhaust stacks and intake vents, then the roof dropped away and the cloud car was over a black abyss again.

Something pinged in the rear of the vehicle.

"Smoke!"

"Good," he said. "Maybe it'll blind 'em."

Han widened his eyes and saw a pair of dark bars ahead. Two bridges, stacked. He'd have to shoot through a hoverlane, but not a congested one. Wherever they were, this part of the city was not exactly prosperous.

The cloud car chugged. Han thought at first a tractor beam had snagged them, but the whine of the little ion engine began to fall in pitch, not rise. The dark bars ahead started to assume shape and depth. Half a kilometer away, maybe, with about the same distance separating them vertically.

"Leia, activate your chair's repulsors," Han said. "And be ready to shut off the magnoclamp."

She saw what he was thinking. "Han, if you think I'm leaving this car without—"

"You're not going anywhere without me."

The cloud car chugged and lost speed, and a blaster bolt shattered the main display. No need for that anyway. There were figures on the lower bridge, watching the battle race toward them. Han angled for the far support girder, and the figures ran for cover. The bridge swelled. Another blaster bolt melted the small comm unit.

They passed under the bridge, and Han stopped weaving. The cloud car chugged again—this time caught in a rescue launches' tractor beam. Han pulled back on the stick, and the cloud car went into a steep climb, passing beneath the far support girder so closely he had to duck—and yell for Leia to do the same.

The launch could not cut its tractor beam in time. It hit the girder and disintegrated, freeing the cloud car to continue skyward. Leia poured blasterfire down into the smoke.

Han spun the car around and saw a two-person rescue launch shoot out of the fumes beneath them, a line of blaster holes burned along the roof of its casualty compartment. The pilot took it into an inside loop, and two snarling Aqualish glared out the ceiling of their blaster-scorched canopy. Leia and the passenger exchanged fire, but at that range even rifle bolts dissipated harmlessly.

The rescue launch leveled off and approached inverted. Han kept waiting for it to roll upright, but the pilot was too good to maneuver into a blind spot. The passenger continued to fire. Instead of wasting precious thrust maneuvering, Han spun the top of the cloud car away from the launch and continued to climb. The upper bridge wasn't far, maybe a hundred meters.

Blaster bolts hammered the bottom of the hull. One burned through, then another.

"Han?" Leia asked. "You do know I can't fire back?"

"I know."

The enemy blasterfire stopped, then the rescue launch roared past just meters above and abruptly dived to avoid the high bridge.

Han eased off the throttle. "Ready to get off this tub?"

"Never been readier to get off anything," Leia said. "Since Jabba's sail barge, anyway."

The cloud car chugged . . . rose level with the bridge . . . chugged again

. . .

Han swung the nose over the edge and leveled off.

The cloud car chugged in relief and shot onto the bridge.

"Now!"

Han unbuckled his crash webbing and twisted around to clasp Leia's arm, then allowed her to pull him free as the repulsor chair rose out of the passenger compartment. The cloud car slid out from beneath them and continued out over the hoverlane. They had barely touched down—Leia settling gently onto her chair's repulsors and Han falling gracelessly to his side—before the rescue launch came up and stitched a fresh line of blaster holes in the cloud car's bottom. The battered vehicle dropped its nose and began a smoky descent, the launch close behind, pouring blaster bolts into its ion drives.

Han rose and, seeing that Leia was all right, looked along the bridge in both directions. If there was anyone around, they were staying out of sight.

"So," he asked, "any idea where we're at?"

Leia shook her head. "Not really, but I think Lamoramora is over by the Troglodyte Park."

"Great—the wrong side of the world," Han said. "It'll take us all day to get back."

A distant explosion rumbled up from the depths of the hoverlane. Han glanced briefly toward the sound, then took Leia's hand and started toward the nearest building.

Leia jerked him back. "Not so fast, flyboy," she said, smiling. "You're the one who got us lost in the first place. I'll find the way home."

Chapter 8

The Senate Inquiry Room door slid aside to reveal a solid wall of newsvide light. By the squall of hushed voices, Leia could sense that the chamber was packed beyond capacity. But it was not until her eyes grew accustomed to the novalike glare that she began to see the faces behind the whispers. The room was crammed horn-to-eyestalk with the media of a thousand different worlds, all murmuring quietly into their microphones as they reported that Leia Organa Solo, for some reason still dressed in a travel-worn flight suit, had arrived at the Corruption Panel's meeting exactly on time.

Han leaned close to Leia's ear. "Looks like we win already," he whispered. "Even if the charges won't stick, Viki will be too busy ducking holocrews to line up support for the vote."

Leia started to remind him to be careful of the microphones, then caught herself and simply nodded. Even if he had never cared for it, Han was as experienced at this game as she was.

"What I want to know is how you're going to get to the accuser's table," Jaina whispered. All Leia's children were there, along with Luke, several more Jedi, and Leia's new Noghri bodyguards. "We'll have to float you!"

"We'll clear the aisle, Mom," Anakin said, nodding to Jacen.

Leia caught him by the arm.

"Now isn't the time for the Jedi to seem arrogant," she said. "I'll walk."

"Walk?" Han asked. "How?"

"With a little help from my family." Leia looked to Jaina—Jaina who had been so angry with her and felt so abandoned by her on Duro—and asked, "Would you mind?"

The smile that came to Jaina's face was almost as lopsided as Han's. "Trust me?"

Leia felt her daughter reach out in the Force, then felt herself rise into a standing position. Her legs started to move, by Jaina's will instead of her own, but in a reasonable imitation of walking. The room erupted into a fresh round of murmurs as the vidcasters commented on what they were broadcasting. Luke and the others took protective positions around Leia, and they started forward.

If Shesh had assassins lurking in the crowd, they had the good sense to realize an attempt now would be hopeless. Leia reached the front of the room and took her seat at the accuser's table, with Han at her side and her children and the others behind her. As was proper for a formal proceeding of this nature, she did not acknowledge Kvarm Jia or any of her other friends behind the high consoles.

Given the importance of punctuality in such matters, Leia was somewhat surprised to note that Viqu Shesh was not at the respondent's table. There was only her chief of staff, a beady-eyed little man who could not help glancing at the accuser's table as though seeing a ghost. Leia caught his gaze and nodded, her lips just hinting at a hard smile. He paled, but returned the gesture and refused to look away.

Han leaned over and whispered, "Where's Viqu?"

"Where do you think?" Leia asked. Their plan had backfired; Shesh had been so confident of their deaths she had not even bothered to attend the Corruption Panel's meeting. "She's rounding up support for the Appeasement Vote."

Han's face fell.

At exactly the appropriate moment, the head of the panel, a Bith female named E'noro, thumbed the signal chime to call the meeting to order. Without preamble, she turned to the respondent's table and addressed Shesh's beady-eyed chief of staff.

"Staff Chief Pomt, I see that Senator Shesh is not present today. Is this panel to take it she has fled the planet?"

This drew a nervous laugh from the gallery—which was promptly silenced by a thumb on the signal chime. Pomt waited a moment for the disturbance to die away, then stood.

"Of course not. Senator Shesh has no wish to show any disrespect to the panel. But as you know, a crucial vote on the Jedi question is coming to the

floor next week, and she refuses to let a cynical ploy by the very subjects of that vote to interfere with her preparation. If it pleases the panel, she requests that the inquiry be postponed until after the Peace Vote.” Pomt cast a sidelong glance in Leia’s direction. “At which time, Senator Shesh will be happy to answer any and all complaints still lodged against her—no matter how groundless they may be.”

“I see.” E’noro turned to Leia. “The timing of the complaint does seem convenient, Princess Leia. Would the Jedi have an objection to such a postponement?”

“The Jedi would not,” Leia said. “But I would. Forgive me for not standing, but I’m sure the panel has heard of my injuries. Let me start by saying that I am here on my own behalf, to complain against a corrupt Senator who has already tried to have me killed in an attempt to conceal her wrongdoings.”

Pomt was on his feet instantly, his voice carrying over the tumult of the crowd only by dint of the ampdroid hovering near his mouth. “These accusations are outrageous slander!”

“I have proof of my charges.” Leia could feel Luke’s astonishment, and that of all the other Jedi. The strategy they had agreed upon had been far more conservative, designed to neutralize Shesh by occupying her time and resources—but it was clear they had to move more boldly. “I am ready to present my proof, and I maintain that any delay greatly enhances the danger not only to my own life, but to the New Republic as well.”

E’noro thumbed the signal chime until the chamber quieted. “Another outburst, and I will bar spectators.” The room quickly went silent, and she turned to Leia. “Princess Leia, what is the substance of your claim?”

Leia summarized what she and Han had discovered about CorDuro Shipping’s treason, then accused Shesh of taking bribes and outlined the attempts on their lives.

“Madam, I really must object—”

E’noro silenced Pomt with a finger wag, then asked Leia, “And the nature of your evidence?”

“Data recordings and witnesses,” Leia said. She could provide enough of each to justify her statement, though the only guilt she could actually prove was CorDuro’s. “The record will speak for itself.”

“Records can be distorted,” Pomt said. “Especially when the subject of an inquiry is not present to defend herself.”

"That is Senator Shesh's doing, not Princess Leia's," E'noro replied harshly.

Leia continued, "I should also mention that Staff Chief Pomt is not innocent in this, Madam. My presence in the panel room today came as something of a shock to him. Both he and Senator Shesh had reason to believe that my husband and I had been killed in an assassination attempt. In fact, the staff chief is the one who provided my location to the original assassins."

"That's a lie!"

"I have witnesses." Leia glanced over her shoulder at her Noghri bodyguards. "You don't remember going to my apartment to ask my whereabouts?"

Pomt's face fell.

"Well, Staff Chief?" E'noro asked.

"It had nothing to do with assassins," Pomt said. "We were, um, concerned about her safety."

"Yes, I do believe that has been established. Staff Chief Pomt, you may consider yourself relieved of office pending investigation." E'noro motioned a pair of guards toward him. "These gentlebeings will escort you from the panel room."

The chamber almost erupted into a tumult—until E'noro thumbed the signal chime. She turned to Leia.

"As for the charges against Senator Shesh . . ."

E'noro activated a comlink, and, save for the sound of her voice, the panel room fell silent. Leia and everyone else listened patiently as E'noro threatened her way through several layers of assistants, then was finally connected to Shesh.

"I don't care who you were with, Senator Shesh," E'noro said into the comlink. "You were expected in my panel room . . . Now, why should that surprise you? We confirmed the schedule three days ago . . . I see. No, I hadn't heard anything about that, but I assure you she's fine. She's sitting right here—and saying some rather unpleasant things about you, I might add . . . Of course we can reschedule . . . A month from now?"

Leia started to object, but E'noro raised her finger and continued to speak into the comlink.

"Consider it done . . . You're welcome, Senator. But I do want to mention that the panel will be taking a vote today . . ." She paused to glance

in both directions down the console; when she received only nods, she said, “And your Senatorial membership will be suspended until the matter is cleared—”

The crackle that came from the comlink was loud enough to hear in the back of the room. E’noro held the device at arm’s length, then shook her head in dismay and thumbed the signal chime.

“It seems,” she said, “this meeting is adjourned.”

A week later, Leia was lying in her bed in the nervesplicing ward of the Orowood Medcenter with both legs elevated on pillows. Han was standing next to her, Anakin and the twins were perched on the edges of the only chairs in the room, and Luke, Mara, and half a dozen other Jedi were gathered around the head of her bed. They were all staring at the vidscreen hanging high on the opposite wall.

“How long can it take to count the vote?” Han demanded. “It’s computerized.”

“Actually, Captain Solo, the organic element slows things considerably,” C-3PO said. He had lasted only one day on the Jolly Man before Izal Waz had dropped him off on Balmorra and personally paid to ship him back to Coruscant. “The computations themselves are done in milliseconds.”

Han reached behind the droid’s head and tripped the main circuit breaker.

“Thank you,” Leia said.

For the first time in weeks, her legs did not ache or throb or burn, but she was barely aware of that fact. She was too interested in watching Borsk Fey’lya’s face on the vidscreen, looking for a beard tug or brow twitch that would tell her which way the Appeasement Vote was going.

Leia’s doctor, a distracted-looking human with a permanent squint and perpetually mussed hair, came into the room. If he noticed the Noghri bodyguards flanking him, or was impressed by the sight of so many famous Jedi in one place, he hid it well. He simply began to prod, poke, and tickle Leia’s legs, issuing quiet instructions to move this or wiggle that.

The nervesplicer said something about normal sensation and improving motor control. But Fey’lya raised his brow just then, and Leia missed whatever it was the doctor said next.

“Did you see that?” Han asked. “He’s surprised.”

“That can’t be good,” Jaina said.

"It's hard to know." Leia reached out and found Han's hand. "Nobody has been able to tell what Borsk thinks will happen."

The doctor stepped into Leia's line of sight. "Princess Leia, I have some news."

"In a minute."

Leia cast an appealing glance at her daughter, who quietly used the Force to slide the doctor out of the way.

Fey'lya was looking directly into the cam now, his fangs bared in a politician's meaningless smile.

"It is my duty to announce that the Peace Vote—or the Appeasement Vote, as it has become known in some circles—has failed by a two-to-one ratio."

"Not even close!" Anakin cried. "How about that?"

The room—and much of the corridor outside—erupted into a chorus of cheering.

The nervesplicer stepped to Leia's side, his face twisted into a frown. "Princess, are you listening? The repair was fully successful. You can start walking later today. Your legs are going to be fine."

"I know, Doctor." Leia pulled the nervesplicer's face down to hers and kissed his cheek—she had no idea why, other than because she was so happy—then said, "Thank you."

"Uh, my pleasure."

The nervesplicer rubbed his cheek, then scowled and retreated. As he departed, Leia sensed that not everyone in the room was completely at ease. She turned to see her brother staring out the transparisteel viewport, his brow furrowed and his jaw clenched, seeming older and wearier than she ever remembered seeing him.

Leia nudged her sister-in-law. "Is Luke seeing something?"

Though Mara would not necessarily share in Luke's Force-vision—if that was what was happening—the two of them were close enough that she could tell if it was anything to be concerned about.

"We can clear everyone out," Han volunteered.

Mara shook her head. "He's been doing this a lot, lately." She took Luke's hand. "I'm pretty sure he just falls into thinking and forgets where he is."

"Yeah." Han flashed a concerned look in Leia's direction. "Happens to me all the time."

“Han, it’s nothing to worry about,” Luke flashed a smile, then turned to Leia and the others. “Jedi Masters don’t crack up—they just get eccentric.”

“That’s a comfort,” Han said.

Luke laughed, then said, “Seriously, I was thinking about where the Jedi go from here. We know this situation has to get worse before it gets better.”

Leia nodded. “With Pomt gone, there’s no way to make those charges stick,” she said. The chief of staff had been found dead with a recorded statement blaming himself for all of the troubles in Shesh’s office. “Nobody believes she’s innocent, but proving it’s another matter.”

“There’s Viki—and too many like her,” Luke agreed. “The Appeasement Vote failed by a two-to-one margin—”

“But that means a third of the Senate voted against us,” Mara finished. “The next time, a corruption panel isn’t going to save us.”

“That’s right,” Luke said. “The Jedi are going to need a quiet way to move around the galaxy, a great river that can carry them wherever they need to go.”

Leia saw where this was going. “And you’re thinking Han and I would be a good team to set up this great river?”

“You do have the skills,” Luke said. “A smuggler and a diplomat.”

Han did not even hesitate. He simply took one glance at their children, got a hard look in his eye, then set his jaw and turned to Leia. “What do you think, partner? Want to wander around the galaxy together?”

“Sure.” Leia pulled him onto the bed and twined her fingers into his. “But I’m navigating.”

PARTIAL AUDIO RECONSTRUCTION

The Essential Guide to Warfare

27 ABY: This recording is set after the events of
Emissary of the Void.

The...to understand about...Vong isn't that they invaded the galaxy from...Rim. It isn't that they...based on pain, or a broken connection with the Force, or a caste...collar around your throat—or even that they shun machinery, and use biotechnology that scurries and bites.

The most important...Vong is this: They don't believe in death.

Some of their sects say the Changing is...of reincarnation, while others speak of a greater world beyond this reality. Some...mystical explanations, while others are poetic descriptions...But they all agree that life—each individual, precious, sentient life—continues after death.

That is why...so freely in battle—and that is the terrible logic...mass sacrifice of slaves and prisoners. What better fate...exalted through a noble, agonizing death—to win them a better... next life? What better offering to the skies than purified living souls...exposed to truth?

None of that, however, really explains why they invaded the galaxy. If you want...listen to me.

The woman...eyes is Master Shaper Mezhan Kwaad... striking cheekbones is Priestess Ngaaluh of the Deception Sect.

And my name, little Jedi, is Vergere.

We represent a secret society...overthrow of the Yuuzhan Vong religion—along with the...and torture, the petty caste system, and the calcified rituals and superstition that keep these people in self-inflicted torment.

Sounds noble, doesn't it?

Unfortunately—Tahiri, I believe your name used to be? We're not here to rescue you.

The only way to sever the Yuuzhan Vong...by destroying their entire society...The dominant elite will helpfully get themselves killed...lumpen masses will be enlightened by the horrors of the battlefield...defeat. We've been working on this for fifty years, and...can't allow one blond Jedi apprentice—or her blue-eyed boyfriend—to stop us.

Why have I told you all our darkest secrets, little Jedi? Because you won't remember any of this—not even meeting me.

That collar around your neck—horrible isn't it?—is a mind control creature called a provoker spineray. You're docile...already programmed you...We're about to do a thousand horrible things to your mind...a slavish disciple of everything I told you about at the start.

Why? To give the galaxy another agonizing symbol of all the inherent wrong of Yuuzhan Vong society. To mobilize the military potential...such as Anakin Solo to help us...tear down the rotting walls, and out of their dead-end culture and into a better, brighter future.

So...for a good cause, you see.

Now, Ngaaluh and I...Mezhan can get back to her work, burning away your human soul.

And, like they used to say in the spy holos, we never had this conversation.

Partial audio reconstruction ends.

FROM THE DESK OF PROFESSOR ELISS

Star Wars Gamer #9

27 ABY: This letter takes place after the events of
Emissary of the Void.

It was just last semester, and the bubble of security in which I had allowed myself to wallow since the return to Sanbra had yet to be popped by the nightly updates on the progress of the Yuuzhan Vong invasion. The girl was a youngish Nosaurian aide in Professor Eppington's department. I's passed her hundreds of times in the hall, but of course Sanbra is a big place. The senior staff was in the lounge, all buzzing about the Vong attack on Yag'Dhul when we heard a roar so loud and abrupt, I thought an air hose had slipped its fittings.

Through the window we saw her on her knees in the courtyard, surrounded by fallen datacards, her arms rigid and her hands squeezing emptiness. That terrible drone only grew louder, as if something were reaching through her parted teeth and yanking the sound from deep in her gut. Most of the onlookers hurried past, embarrassed, while others tried to speak to her but could see no cognition in those blank eyes. Eventually campus security anesthetized her and loaded her into the medic's speeder.

We later learned her homeworld had been wiped clean by the Vong. I'm ashamed to admit I didn't even know her name.

– Tem Eliss

TAHIRI VEILA: CORELLIAN SECURITY BRIEFING

The Essential Guide to Warfare

27 ABY: This briefing is set after the events of
Emissary of the Void.

“Knowing Your Enemy”

Yuuzhan Vong weaponry is, in a word, weird. We use sharp-edged eels that serve as whips or edged weapons, blobs of jelly to tie up people’s limbs, and flying bugs in place of detonators. But it’s perfect for melee fighters and silent infiltrators. No noise, no telltale energy discharge, no circuits or power cells, for sensors to detect. Vonduun armor is the living ebony shell of a man-sized crustacean, reworked to fit around a humanoid body. It may look weird—especially when they leave the limbs on—but it’s tough enough to stop blaster bolts.

Imagine being on perimeter patrol, or crouched waiting in trench positions. At night, in a rainstorm. Now imagine exploding bugs and venom-spitting whips and monsters in spiked armor—suddenly right on top of you, coming out of the dark from the wrong direction, with no warning. That is how we fight.

Our slave infantry don’t try to hid—they’re designed for wave assaults, but they aren’t expected to do much fighting until they get into a melee, either. They’re just expendable. So you gun most of them down with auto blasters, and the ones who are left law their way into your position, and start biting you. We’re not a nice people, as I’ve repeatedly tried to explain to Anakin.

Where necessary, we’ve proved entirely capable of turning our biotechnology into guns—volcano cannons, your pilots call them. Our primary weapon for armored vehicles and warships is the yaret kor, or plasma mortar, which works just like a turbolaser, while most of our big

ships fire magma missiles, flying spikes of rock that work just like proton torpedoes. Jaina says they have a better maneuver patter than anything from Incom.

Of course, it all probably still looks weird to you, just like it looks weird to the part of me that's still human. Take the Rakamat, the big warkeeper that Master Skywalker killed at Dantooine. It's a six-legged armored monster the size of a krayt dragon, with plating a foot thick, and plasma cannons and dovin basals implanted along its spine. Those massive projecting plates along its back act as cooling vanes for its overheated biology. And it has a control room and troop compartment in its belly, which somehow doesn't seem gross to me anymore.

And I think that's enough explaining for today, if you don't mind.

THE APPRENTICE

Star Wars Gamer #8

27 ABY: This story takes place during the events of chapter 21 in *Dark Journey*.

Elaine Cunningham

Jaina Solo adjusted the restraints on the copilot chair and leaned forward, eager for her first glimpse of Gallinore. The small Hapan freighter glided smoothly out of hyperspace, and star lines compressed into brilliant points of light — a beautiful sight, but one that could have marked nearly any destination. Then the ship banked sharply to starboard, and a soft green haze bloomed against the darkness of space.

Mist clung to the deeply forested planet, and the slanting rays of the rising sun lent the humid atmosphere a luminous, verdant glow. Lowbacca let out a low, poignant moan that mingled appreciation and longing.

“It does look a bit like Kashyyyk,” Jaina agreed, naming the Wookiees home world.

She glanced back at her companions. Lowbacca had always been thin by Wookiee standards, but their recent captivity had left him positively gaunt, and his ginger-hued fur was dull and patchy. Tenel Ka was thinner, too, and her dark green flight suit clung to her too-slender form. Her long reddish hair was carefully plaited in the many-braided fashion of a Dathomiri warrior, but with one difference: She'd swept her hair over to one side to hide the raw patch left when a Yuuzhan Vong inquisitor had yanked out one of her braids. Jaina quickly averted her eyes from this reminder of their shared ordeal. Her own scars were of a different sort.

Her gaze shifted to the man in the pilot seat. Kyp Durrón could add about a dozen years to her eighteen. The long, careless waves of brown hair were threaded with silver, and faint lines collected at the corners of his green eyes — lines that suggested easy smiles and shared laughter. Kyp had the sort of face that inspired camaraderie and confidence, and probably would have even without the added charisma of his formidable Jedi powers. One thing was certain: People followed Kyp. Jaina intended to figure out why.

The mists of Gallinore swirled up to receive their ship. Jaina shifted impatiently in her seat. Her fingers itched for the feel of the controls, and she briskly scrubbed one hand against the leg of her flight suit as if that

could erase the urge to take over. Kyp was a Jedi Master, however, and — more importantly — a Master whod asked Jaina to be his apprentice. For Jaina, sitting in the copilots chair was one way of taking this notion for a test flight.

Part of her wanted to reject his offer out of hand. Kyp Durrion had been a dubious figure before the war started, before he'd undertaken his rogue crusade against the Yuuzhan Vong invaders. His forays were highly controversial, and his passionate advocacy of aggressive tactics brought discord to every Jedi gathering, whether he attended or not.

But at some level, Jaina sensed that she and Kyp were already flying on the same vector. She couldn't argue against either his philosophy or his methods. She just wasnt sure she wanted to hand over the controls.

Kyp peered at the unbroken expanse of green rushing up toward their ship. "The navicomputer confirms our landing coordinates, but I don't see anything down there that looks like a city."

Tenel Ka glanced up from the datapad she'd been studying throughout most of the trip. "Dimitor is difficult to see from above. The city is constructed mostly of green marble and all the streets are lined with tall trees. Even the landing docks are paved with multicolored stone, making them indistinguishable from meadowland until you are almost upon them."

"Makes you wonder what they've got to hide," Kyp observed, slinging a quick, pointed glance at Jaina.

"Gallinore is a lawful world, closely affiliated with the government of Hapes," Tenel Ka returned gravely. Her gaze shifted to Jaina. "I'm more concerned about our purposes than theirs. We are landing shortly. Shouldn't you tell us why we've come?"

Jaina conceded with a nod. "Let me see your lightsaber."

The warrior woman frowned in puzzlement, but she removed the weapon from her belt and handed it over.

Jaina turned the unusual lightsaber over in her hand, running her thumb over the strange carvings Tenel Ka had meticulously etched into the yellowed ivory handle. "A rancor's tooth," she observed. With a flick of her thumb she unleashed a stream of brilliant, turquoise light — a strangely iridescent hue, one that, on close inspection, held dancing motes in every color of the visible spectrum, "You used rainbow gems for the focusing crystals, right? From Gallinore?"

"Fact," Tenel Ka confirmed.

“These ‘gems’ are actually living creature, yet you were able to use them in a Jedi lightsaber — just as Anakin attuned the Yuuzhan Vong’s lambent crystals to his. I’ve read that the rainbow gems, like many of the unique life forms on this world, were bio engineered.”

Understanding dawned on the warrior woman’s face. “This similarity leads you to hope the scientists of Gallinore can help you understand the Trickster,” she concluded, naming the living ship that Jaina and Zekk had stolen from a Yuuzhan Vong worldship.

“That’s the plan.” Jaina switched off her friend’s Jedi weapon and handed it back.

They fell silent as Kyp made voice contact with the dock officials. He passed along the authorization codes and deftly maneuvered the ship down through layers of clouds. The three younger Jedi rose immediately, leaving him to power down the controls.

The ramp unfolded, and Jaina walked down and gazed around the docks with interest. She could see why this place was nearly invisible from above.

A stiff breeze stirred the thick, landbound clouds that filled the open docks and clung to the trees in the city beyond. Tall, swaying branches moved in and out of sight like timid forest animals. The docking bays were teeming with pilots, mechanics, and dock officials, all clad in flight suits fashioned from mottled shades of green. They, too, seemed to move in and out of the mists in random patterns. Some odd optical quirk made their movements appear nearly identical to that of the swaying foliage.

Even so, workers immediately converged on any newly landed ship, using stout little hover sleds to maneuver it into a docking bay covered by a tall, camouflaged canopy. It was hard to believe that Gallinore’s sun could burn off the sheltering morning clouds before reaching its zenith. Jaina squinted up at the brightest patch of fog, noting the sun’s position with dismay. She’d have to work fast.

“The customs building,” Tenel Ka said, nodding toward a low, green structure. “City officials will be expecting us there.” She set her shoulders back, in the manner of a warrior preparing to do battle, and set off at a brisk pace.

A fleeting grin touched Jaina’s lips as she imagined the ‘diplomatic meeting’ that would follow. Tenel Ka was a princess of Hapes, the dominate world in the Hapes Cluster, but she was here as a warrior to exhort others to prepare for the coming conflict. At Jaina’s suggestion, all of the visiting

Jedi except Lowbacca were dressed in green flight suits identical to those worn by the Gallinorians. She'd suggested this as a means of honoring local custom, of creating an impression of unity. Tenel Ka had been pleased with this notion, and she didn't ask if Jaina had had other reasons for wanting to blend in.

Kyp came down the ramp and checked the hatch leading into the cargo hold. Tenel Ka glanced over at the older Jedi. Although the expression on her face did not change or her pace alter, disapproval rolled off her in waves.

Jaina stepped into the Dathomiri warriors path and faced her down. "All right, let's have it."

Tenel Ka stopped and regarded Jaina with a cool, gray-eyed stare. "I understand your desire to learn from Gallinore's scientists. But why is Kyp Durrone with us? Surely you're not considering his offer of apprenticeship."

"Maybe I should. Kyp is an exceptionally powerful Jedi." Jaina paused for a brief, humorless smile. "He'd have to be. The only reason he's still alive is that people who mattered believed that his talent overbalanced his past crimes."

Tenel Ka lifted one red-gold brow. "It is not like you to be cynical."

"Practical," Jaina corrected. "Kyp Durrone knows things I don't. I could learn from him."

"Fact. That's what concerns me."

Jaina blew out a frustrated sigh and put down her best card — an endorsement powerful enough to clinch arguments and bring conversations to a dead stop. "Master Luke trusts him."

"Do you?" Tenel Ka shot back. "Can you, after what he did at Sernpidal?"

The blunt reminder hit Jaina like a punch to the gut. Not long ago, Kyp had used the Force to convince Jaina that enemy shipyards hidden among the fragments of the dead world Sernpidal were building super weapons. Kyp had manipulated her, using the Solo name and Jaina's personal reputation as a Rogue Squadron pilot to convince New Republic forces to join in the attack. That deception still stung, as did the knowledge that Rogue Squadron, largely at her instigation, had attacked a civilian target.

She tried to dismiss all this with an impatient shrug. "The mission was a success. The destruction of the Vong's new worldship strengthened the Republic position."

"Perhaps," Tenel Ka allowed. "Yet I wonder if your willingness to attack Sernpidal had as much to do with vengeance as tactics."

A Wookiee howl of protest preempted Jaina's retort. Lowbacca stepped up to Jaina's side, his long arms folded over his chest and his black eyes narrowed. He whuffed out a few curt, indignant phrases. Some of the nuances of the Wookiee language might have escaped Tenel Ka, but his meaning was clear enough to bring a faint flush to her cheeks.

She inclined her head. "I apologize, my friend. I meant no disrespect to your uncle Chewbacca's honor, or to the life debt you assumed in his name. His sacrifice on Sernpidal would indeed be diminished by vengeance." The look she sent at Jaina was pointed, but not as sharp as it might otherwise have been.

Kyp strode over to the trio. His gaze slid over them, lingering on Lowbaccas defensive stance. "What did I miss?"

"We're just getting ready to split up," Jaina said, mindful of the possible double meaning her words held — and certain that Kyp would pick up on the nuance. "Tenel Ka has some sort of diplomatic meeting to attend, and Lowie and I will go to the research center."

"I see. I'll stay with the ship and keep an eye on things."

"That should not be necessary," Tenel Ka observed. "Dimitor is a lawful city."

"All the more reason I should stay here," Kyp said in a dry tone. A glint entered his eyes and he turned his most charming smile on Tenel Ka. "Or perhaps I misunderstood. Were you inviting me to join you?"

The warrior's eyes widened, and for a moment her formidable composure faltered. Before she could formulate a suitably tactful refusal, Kyp sent her a mocking wink and then strode off toward their ship.

Jaina lifted a hand to her lips to conceal a smirk. Of course the Jedi Master had sensed the discord between the two young women, and he'd enacted this small, teasing vengeance on Jaina's behalf. His support amused and warmed her, even though she recognized the manipulation that prompted it. For whatever reason, Kyp wanted to take over her training. She intended to see just how far he'd go to meet this particular objective.

She waited until Tenel Ka left with a pair of city officials, then she turned grateful eyes to her genuine supporter. Lowbacca acted as a buffer between Jaina and her other friends. Tenel Ka was not the only young Jedi who followed Jaina but did not entirely trust her. No one questioned the Wookiee's integrity, however, and his continued support of Jaina helped mitigate their concerns.

"I don't know what I'd do without you," she said sincerely.

Lowbacca's brief, disgruntled response brought a grin to Jaina's face. "If EmTeecee was still around, he'd probably translate that as 'Master Lowbacca respectfully suggests that without his intervention, you might inadvertently enter targeting coordinates that focus your weapons upon vital portions of your own anatomy.' I'll bet you really miss that little droid."

The Wookiee let out an unmistakably derisive chuff.

Jaina tucked her arm through his. "Me either," she agreed.

Jaina and Lowbacca wove through the mist-laden maze of green marble buildings to the sprawling research district. A letter from Ta'a Chume, Tenel Kas grandmother and the former Queen Mother of Hapes, earned them full cooperation and unquestioned access to the facility. Within moments, Lowbacca was seated before a terminal, his furry digits flying as he sifted through computerized records of the Gallinore research, searching for anything that might provide a link between a technology that he and Jaina could understand, and the secrets of the Trickster, their stolen Vong ship.

But apparently even Ta'a Chumes influence was not enough to grant them unsupervised access to this information. A dark-haired young woman wearing a technician's white tunic and a perpetually worried expression stayed nearby to "help" them. Jaina waited until the tech's comlink beeped, then bent over and rested her chin on the Wookiees shoulders.

"Can you get me a reading on the layout and security?" she said softly.

Lowbacca growled a question. In response, Jaina sent him mental images of their recent battle in the Yuuzhan Vong worldship, flashed back to him the terror and uncertainty of fighting their way through the unknown. A knowledge of the worldship's layout might have made a difference, might have saved some of the lives lost in that terrible place. A soft, whirring moan escaped the Wookiee as he acknowledged their shared loss, and the prudence of Jaina's precaution.

She straightened up and turned to the technician. "I need to speak with Sinsor Khal. Can you show me where I might find him?"

A peculiar expression crossed the young womans face, but she pulled out her comlink again and relayed Jaina's request. Lowbacca deftly affixed a holocube to an output terminal and transferred the requested data. This he surreptitiously passed to Jaina.

In moments an armed escort arrived and guided her through a maze of pristine white halls. They left her before a large door, nodded toward a palm reader mounted beside the door, and left at a much faster pace than that which had brought them here.

Jaina shrugged, then placed her hand against the device. The door irised open. She ducked through into a large room, one crowded with so much equipment, all of it in such disarray, that for a moment Jaina suspected she was viewing the result of a head-on collision between two large ships. The door snapped shut behind her with a clang like that of a prison door.

She crept through the room, surveying it as she might a battlefield. When she knew all she needed, she slipped out the way she'd come and retraced her steps through the corridors, finally making her way back to their ship.

Kyp awaited her in the hold, his lean face grim and his eyes holding no trace of the sly humor he'd turned against Tenel Ka. He nodded toward their shared secret — the Hapan prisoner hidden in the hold, kept in a Force-induced trance so deep that the two other Jedi couldn't perceive the presence of a fifth person aboard ship.

"Let's hear it," he said without preamble.

"You know that this man is a Yuuzhan Vong collaborator," Jaina began, "and that he attacked Tenel Ka, a member of the Hapan royal family. That's a capital crime on Hapes. If we hadn't helped him escape, he would have been executed."

Kyp shifted one shoulder in a negligent shrug. "Jedi are sworn to protect all living things, yet I find myself strangely unable to shed tears on his behalf."

"The Vong gave him a coral slave implant," she went on. "This is a communication and control device. I want to have it removed, tested, and modified. Ultimately I want to hit the Yuuzhan Vong with their own weapons."

Interest sparked in the Jedi Masters' eyes. Jaina activated the holocube, and a shining model of the building's layout took shape, floating in the air between them.

"Lowbacca's good. He got me this without anyone realizing what he was doing. He can just as easily remove any records from the system. We get this man in, we get out, we erase our footsteps. Lowbacca can wipe anyone off the security records we don't want to leave there, and rumor has it that you've had practice removing unwanted memories from people."

She glanced expectantly at Kyp. He nodded for her to continue. "Here's the lab, down in this lower level. I've already been there. These plans have all the details we need, but I wanted to see the layout with my own eyes and get a feel for it through the Force. Here's what I think we should do."

Kyp listened intently to her plan, his expression inscrutable. His eyes flickered, once, when she concluded her proposal by noting, "You asked me to be your apprentice. This is where it starts."

He leaned against the wall and folded his arms. "You have a high opinion of your value."

"That's the asking price." Jaina spread both hands and gave him her best imitation of her father's trademark smirk. "Do you want me or not?"

For a long moment the two Jedi locked stares.

"You know we could never speak of this, not to anyone," Kyp said.

"Who would I tell?" she retorted. "Uncle Luke?"

He lowered his head in a slow nod, holding her gaze. "All right, then. Let's get it done."

It took both Jedi to wrestle their prisoner into a green flight suit, even though he was still deep in stasis. The Hapan was a big man, at least a head taller than Kyp and heavily muscled. He was enough trouble as deadweight; Jaina figured he'd be much worse awake. His recent fight with Tenel Ka had revealed considerable skill in the Hapan kickboxing style. Two Jedi could certainly handle him, but not without drawing unwanted attention.

Finally the task was done. Jaina sat back on her heels and tucked a stray wisp of brown hair behind one ear. "I say we transport him like this. Put him on a repulsor sled."

Kyp shook his head. "Three of us walking away from the ship wouldn't draw much notice. Two walking and one floating... that's likely to raise some questions. Plus, the ventilation tunnels are light and heat sensitive. The sled doesn't generate much heat, but the control lights might be enough to tip off the sensors."

"I could reset the controls."

"Sure, but that would take time. I doubt we've got much to spare."

Jaina conceded with a nod. She watched intently as Kyp placed a hand on the man's temples. She felt the Jedi Master reach out into the prisoner's mind, felt him use the Force to peel back the shields holding him in torpor.

The big man came awake suddenly, thrashing and sputtering like a man drowning in a sea of nightmares. His eyes focused on Jaina, and he abruptly fell still and silent. Memory flickered in them, and then a searing flash of panic — hers had been the last face he'd seen before an invisible fist seized his mind and crushed it into darkness and silence.

The Hapan hauled himself to a sitting position and scuttled away, crab-walking backward as he put as much distance between himself and the young Jedi as possible. "Why?" he demanded in a dry, raspy tone.

Jaina knew precisely what he meant. Why had his escape from the prisons of Hapes been arranged? Why were his two compatriots allowed to continue the escape, while he was kept behind? Why had he been mind-controlled and stashed in the hold of some ship?

She sent him a reassuring smile. "Princess Tenel Ka has issued a conditional pardon. She understands the Yuuzhan Vong implant might have prompted you to attack her. We've brought you to Gallinore to have it removed. Afterward, if you'll recant your desertion, and if a Jedi inquiry shows that you're free of any further treasonous intent, your pardon will take full effect."

"Why?" he repeated in a stronger tone.

"We're trying to win back deserters, especially those who might possess valuable information about the Yuuzhan Vong. Hapes needs all the good pilots it can get."

Wary blue eyes searched her face as the man weighed her claim. "And the other two men? The pirates who escaped with me?"

"They'll be picked up before they leave Hapes atmosphere. Since we're circumventing Hapan law, we've got to keep this quiet until we know for sure that the effort is worthwhile. Your friends set-away ships will be reported as destroyed. That way, if they don't rehabilitate, they'll already be listed as dead."

Jaina lifted one eyebrow, underscoring the choices before him. She deliberately made her story grim enough to be plausible and added a powerful nudge of Jedi persuasion. After a moment the man accepted his "reprieve" with a nod. The two Jedi helped him to his feet and flanked him as they headed toward the pilot refresher facility.

"We're going in through the ventilation tunnels," Jaina explained as they slipped into a dimly lit side corridor.

They stopped before a large, circular hatch. Kyp caught her wrist as she reached for the controls. "Wait. The light in this hall could trigger an alarm."

He drew his lightsaber and swept it in a shining arc toward the ceiling lights. They flared sharply and then blinked out, leaving the hall in darkness.

Immediately a profound chill swept through Jaina. She reached out for their prisoner with a hand that suddenly was heavy and numb. Her fingers closed around the Hapan's wrist. His skin felt cold to the touch.

"What is this?" he demanded thickly. "What's happening?"

"I have to lower our body temperature to match the air temperature in the tunnels," Kyp responded. "It might not be comfortable, but it's necessary. Move slowly, keep alert. Remember, if we're caught, the Gallinore officials will send you right back to that Hapan prison."

"I copy," the man mumbled.

Jaina eased the door open and hauled herself into the tunnel. The rounded passage was just big enough to crawl through, and it sloped downward. As Jaina pulled herself along, she quickly became grateful for the decline. The tunnels were cold, and her chilled limbs felt sluggish and unresponsive.

Finally the tunnel leveled out, and an almost imperceptible bluish glow dawned at the end. Jaina picked up her pace. The tunnel opened into a rounded corridor big enough to allow them to walk upright. She rolled out, reveling in the soft light. The tunnel was still painfully cold, but after the utter darkness of the side tunnels, the faint diffused light felt oddly reassuring. She stepped aside to allow the Hapan to emerge. The big man crawled out and stretched, then rolled his shoulders to loosen cramped muscles.

He fell into step with the two Jedi, walking nearly as quietly as his much-smaller captors. Jaina reached out with the Force, trying to measure his mood and intentions. She picked up a high level of anxiety, but under the circumstances that seemed reasonable.

They moved silently through a maze of tunnels, counting off sidetunnels and drainage shoots, following the pattern that Kyp had committed to memory. Finally the Jedi Master pointed to a hatch on the far wall. "That's it," he said softly.

Without warning, the Hapan dropped to the floor and executed a quick leg sweep. His attack was unbelievably quick — would have been even if he hadn't been chilled to near-immobility. Kyp went down, and his tumble

gave Jaina time to stumble back a couple of paces. The prisoner completed the spin and came up in one fluid movement.

He pivoted to one side, brought his knee up and snapped off a quick kick. Instantly Jaina fell back into lessons learned during her brief apprenticeship with Mara Jade. Recognizing the feint, she ducked under the first high kick. She pivoted hard toward the kickboxer, timing her momentum to his second kick and slamming her stiffened forearm against the sensitive tendon just below the bunched muscle of his calf.

The jolt of impact was not nearly as hard as she'd expected. Too late, Jaina recognized the double feint. The Hapans third, powerful kick caught her off balance and sent her flying.

Jaina hit the rounded wall and rolled down. She came up on one knee, too cold and too angry to feel the pain that would certainly come later. The kickboxer advanced, sweeping one stiffened leg up high for a powerful downward chop.

Instinctively Jaina threw out one hand toward her attacker. Dark lightning flared from her fingertips. Jagged, eerily dancing tendrils caught the Hapan, lifted him, and then hurled him across the tunnel.

Once before Jaina had unleashed Force lightning. This time it came more easily — but once summoned, it was harder to dispel. Streaks of dark energy edged with searing blue-violet shadows poured from her, pinning the writhing, struggling man against the tunnel wall.

She was dimly aware of another power falling like a shadow on her dark and brilliant rage. The lighting ended with an abrupt, audible sizzle as Kyp seized her wrist. He spun her around to face him.

For a moment she simply stared at the Jedi Master, stunned at her own actions and not at all sure whether they would meet with condemnation or approval.

Kyp broke off first. She tracked his gaze up at the ceiling, and noticed the faint hiss coming from dozens of small round openings. "The flash set off the sensors," he said curtly. "Lets get him out."

They hauled the dazed Hapan to his feet and started toward the hatch. A wall of durasteel suddenly slammed down into their path, sealing off the tunnel. Jaina spun in time to see a similar wall fall behind them. The hiss rose in volume, and suddenly a stream of cold, acrid-smelling fluid poured from the valves.

A swift flood of coolant poured into the locked-off tunnel, knocking Jaina's feet from under her and sending her spinning down into the churning fluid. She went under briefly and came up spitting out a mouthful of the bitter stuff.

Something seized her foot and yanked her under again. Jaina flailed about until her hand grazed some metallic hold on the rounded wall. She seized it and struggled to pull away from her attacker. She hauled herself upward, found another handhold. Up she went, rising toward the ceiling by slow, painful centimeters. The coolant numbed her, and her lungs ached and burned. Her struggle ceased abruptly, and she shot upward. Her head broke the surface, and for a few moments all she could do was gasp in air and cling to her cold metal perch.

Jaina looked around for Kyp. He'd found a similar handhold. To her surprise, his free arm was looped under the Hapan's chin, keeping him afloat in a rescuers hold. She'd assumed that the big man had been trying to pull her under, but realized at a glance that he was in condition to continue his attack.

The coolant level continued its swift rise, and the powerful spray coming from above made breathing difficult and speech impossible. Jaina slanted a glance toward the ceiling. The fluid would soon reach the top. If they didn't find a way out soon, they'd drown.

Kyp caught her eye and looked pointedly toward her left — toward the unseen force that had tried to pull her under. Jaina noted the vortex rising to the surface, spreading toward them. A drainage tunnel, most likely.

The Jedi Master let go, deliberately releasing himself and his charge into the powerful spiral. Jaina took a long, deep breath and followed.

Down she fell, whirling through the cold and darkness. Her tumbling descent slowed as the wall narrowed, and then diffused light rushed toward her through the tumbling water. Silhouetted against it were the dark, tumbling shapes of Kyp and their prisoner. Then, suddenly, both men stopped.

Jaina continued to hurtle forward. She made out the regular shape of a metal grate, and then a heartbeat later she slammed headlong into it.

Coolant continued to surge through the narrow tunnel, pinning her to the grate like a mynock stuck to an accelerating starfighter. She struggled to free herself, but the force of the rushing fluid was just too great.

She felt Kyps touch through the Force, and then she was sliding to one side of the grate, moved by a psychic shove more powerful than the swift-flowing stream. The flare of Kyps lightsaber darted toward the hatch, and the lock gave way.

The three of them tumbled out, falling into a wide, shallow tank. Jaina struggled to the side and hauled herself over. She tumbled to the floor — and came to a stop just short of several pairs of booted feet.

Strong hands seized her and dragged her upright. Inner warmth flooded through Jaina in a sudden wash of power, and her chilled limbs awoke to a thousand sharp prickles of pain. She clung to the guard's wrists, certain that she'd fall if he let her go. Though every instinct prompted her to fight, Jaina focused on the struggle within. She was perilously close to losing consciousness. If she did, then all would be lost.

A bright flare of light filled the room, a burst of power that shattered Jaina's faltering concentration. She slid to the floor, no longer supported by the guard, and let the darkness claim her.

The dull humming in Jaina's ears rose swiftly to a shrill wail and then dissipated in a sharp, sudden burst. She sat up abruptly, feeling dazed and disoriented. After a moment, she remembered her mission, and the bruising tumble that had brought them this far.

She looked around. The Hapan had recovered consciousness. He leaned heavily against the now-empty coolant tank, eyeing her with undisguised horror. Jaina's gaze quickly slid away from the accusing stare. Four guards lay sprawled across the floor. Kyp Durrone knelt by one of them, rhythmically pumping the man's chest with both hands. The guard's body suddenly jerked, and the bluish color began to fade from his face.

The Jedi Master rose to his feet and extended a hand to Jaina. She took it and let him pull her up. "Wow," she said, gazing at the Force-blasted guards. "Who did this, you or me?"

"We've got to keep moving," Kyp said, ignoring her question. "The longer this takes, the slimmer our chances of walking out of here."

Jaina nodded. "Before we go, I need you to show me how to wipe away memories. They can't remember they saw us here."

When he did not respond, she continued her argument. "The scientist is a political prisoner. Secrecy is vital, not only so we can get our prisoner

where he needs to go, but also to stave off more reactionary response to the Jedi."

Kyp held his silence for a few moments. "No."

"No?" she repeated, incredulous. "You said yourself that no one can know about this."

"And I hold to that. But I'll do it myself."

She lifted one brow in challenge. "What's the matter? Not the sort of lessons you had in mind?"

"An apprentice should learn from a Master, not repeat his mistakes."

"This is no different from the little Jedi mind tricks that every Jedi uses without a twinge of guilt," she argued, "You're just better at it than most. If I'd wanted to become a singer of ballads, I'd be traveling with Tionne. You want to win the war against the Yuuzhan Vong. That's why we're here. Show me."

The Jedi Master let out a profound sigh. He grimaced as if steeling himself for an unpleasant task, then dropped to one knee. "Watch, feel and follow," he instructed, and then reached out to one of the prisoners.

Jaina felt the older Jedi's power reach into the man's mind. Kyp formed the image of a morning-misted sun, barely visible above the forest horizons of Gallinore — about the time, Jaina recalled, that they had landed. With smooth, cool strokes, Kyp swept away the memory from that moment to this. He eased away, like a thief creeping from a plundered home.

Slowly Kyp broke the contact with the fallen guard and lifted his eyes to hers. His face was still pale from the chilling tumble, and the deep shadows beneath his eyes made them look vividly green. The power in them, though fading, was both eerie and compelling. "Now you."

Jaina nodded and reached out to another guard. But instead of envisioning the morning sun, she focused upon an image of a chronometer. Slowly she forced it into backward motion, stripping away moments from a man's life.

When the task was done, she looked to the Jedi Master. He studied her for a moment, his expression unreadable. "You have a knack for this," he said at last. "Good control. Very precise. You take that one, I'll do the other. Let's get this over with."

In moments they were back on their way to Sinsor Khal's lab. Jaina placed her hand on the palm reader, and the door slid open. A small, thin man glanced up from his work. At first glance there was nothing particularly

unusual about him. His sandy hair was neatly groomed, and his beard short and trimmed. He wore a red lab coat marked with a few dark spots.

“Professor Khal?” Jaina inquired.

“I am he. And you’d be Ta’a Chumes young protege,” he said easily. “Welcome.”

He came forward, one hand extended in greeting. At close range she noted the faint, coppery scent emanated from the red garments, and realized that the color was chosen for practicality, or perhaps camouflage. This was a man who dealt in blood, and his red lab coat served the same purpose in this venue that the green flight suits did above.

Jaina took Sinsor Khals hand, noting as she did that the scientist was not much taller than she. She could look him directly in the face without tipping back her head — an unusual experience for the small young woman.

The scientist did not return her scrutiny. In fact, his eyes never settled on her or the two men behind her. Obviously he was aware of them, but he seemed strangely detached. Most people would have commented on their wet clothes, their disheveled appearance. Curious, Jaina reached out through the Force. There was little to read. Sinsor Khal was strangely closed to her. The only perception she could pick up was a neutral curiosity, devoid of almost any emotional flavoring and far different from any human response shed encountered before. They were not persons but... specimens, perhaps?

She quickly withdrew her hand and gestured toward the tall Hapan. “This man has the implant.”

“Just put him over there,” he said, gesturing.

“There” was a long table, bordered with a small gutter and slanted downward slightly toward a pair of drains.

Kyp turned a dubious stare toward Jaina. “It’ll be fine,” she asserted.

The prisoner didn’t share her optimism. The struggle to get him onto the table ended abruptly when Sinsor Khal placed a small blaster-shaped weapon against the mans shoulder and pressed the trigger. The Hapan slumped over the table.

“Now then,” the scientist announced. “All set for a quick vivisection and a general tune-up. A figure of speech,” he added cheerfully, as if he perceived the stormcloud frown gathering on Kyp’s face.

Jaina and Kyp worked together to shift the big man onto the table. As she straightened, hands to the small of her aching back, Jaina felt a flash of

mental power, a force of mind weirdly similar to that of a Jedi. She whirled toward it and stared directly into Sinsor Khals face. The scientist was looking at her, really looking, with an intensity that suggested he saw things most people could never fathom.

"I know you," he observed.

Jaina shook her head. "From what Taa Chume said, you were already a guest of Gallinore's government when I was learning to walk. I've never been to Gallinore before."

An odd smile slipped onto Sinsor Khal's face. He held his hand out, palm up. A small, sharp tool rose from the tray and settled down into his grasp with practiced ease. Jaina's jaw fell, but the scientist hardly seemed to notice his own feat.

"I didn't say we'd met," the failed Jedi specified. "I said I know you."

Kyp started forward. Jaina placed one hand on his arm. "We've got to get back," she said softly. "We still have some work to do to make sure there's no record of our passing."

After a moment, Kyp nodded agreement. They left their prisoner in Sinsor Khal's dubious care and retraced their steps through the corridors, seeking out all those they'd encountered. The older Jedi insisted on doing most of the work. Jaina was content to let him do as he willed. She'd stretched her Force powers to new levels today, and the scientist's words echoed through her thoughts like mocking laughter. She could not ignore them, could not deny them — not considering the task still before her.

Finally Kyp returned to the ship, leaving Jaina to deal with Lowbacca. As she entered the research center, all the chill and pain of the tunnels seemed to come back to her, centering in a cold lump in the pit of her stomach.

Lowbacca was still seated at the terminal, his furry face engrossed. The dark-haired tech had grown bored of her assignment and sat wearily at another workstation. A faint smile touched Jaina's lips. The Wookiee loved computers. He probably had scant perception of the hours that had passed since his arrival. In a way, that made her task easier.

Jaina came up behind him and leaned down, resting her chin on his shoulder. Her eyes drifted shut, and she drew in a long, steadying breath. The familiar, musty scent of Wookiee fur filled her senses. She reached out through the Force and for a moment savored the solid, loyal presence that was Lowbacca. The only friend who truly trusted her, the only Jedi who looked at her and saw the Jaina she once had been.

She stealthily slipped him a holocube. The Wookiee quickly transferred the needed information and returned it to her. When he slipped it into her hand, she caught his big paw and clung to it for a moment. He tipped his head to one side and slanted a curious look back up at her. His nose wrinkled at the scent of coolant that clung to her nearly-dry flight suit.

“Long story,” she said softly. “I need you to get into the security records. I was never there. Make that happen.”

The Wookiee nodded and erased her footsteps with a few deft movements. When a satisfied grunt announced his success, Jaina reached out through the link between them and brought to mind an image of a Wookiee sun dial. Slowly, inexorably, she forced the shadows to deepen. A few moments later, Jaina straightened up and turned toward the tech. Puzzlement and then concern swept the woman’s thin face. Suddenly Jaina was aware of the damp tracks of tears on her cheeks. She wiped them away, as shed wiped the past few hours from Lowbacca’s memory.

YLESIA

Walter Jon Williams

28 ABY: This story takes place between chapters 21
and 22 of *Destiny's Way*.

Nom Anor suppressed a shiver at the sight of the Shamed One Onimi leering from the doorway. Something in him shrank at the ppearance of the lank creature with his misshapen head and knowing smile.

Onimi's grin widened.

Nom Anor, distaste prickling, pushed past the Shamed One and entered. The rounded resinous walls of the chamber shone with a faint luminescence, and the air bore the metallic scent of blood. In the dim light Nom Anor made out the magnificently scarred and mutilated form of Supreme Overlord Shimrra, reclining on a dais of pulsing red hau polyps. Onimi, the Supreme One's familiar, sank into the shadows at Shimrra's feet. Nom Anor prostrated himself, all too aware of the scrutiny of Shimrra's rainbow eyes.

The Supreme Overlord's deep voice rolled out of the darkness. "You have news of the infidels?"

"I have, Supreme One."

"Stand, Executor, and enlighten me."

Nom Anor repressed a shiver of fear as he rose to his feet. This was Shimrra's private audience chamber, not the great reception hall, and Nom Anor was absolutely alone here. He would much rather be able to hide behind his superior Yoog Skell and a whole deputation of intendants.

Never think to lie to the Supreme One, Yoog Skell had warned.

Nom Anor would not. He probably *could* not. Fortunately he was well prepared with the latest news of the infidels' efforts against the Yuuzhan Vong.

"The enemy continue their series of raids against our territory. They dare not confront our might directly, and confine themselves to picking off isolated detachments or raiding our lines of communication. If a substantial fleet opposes them, they flee without fighting."

The Supreme Overlord's head, the sum of its features barely discernable as a face with all its scars and tattoos and slashings, loomed forward in the

shadowy light. "Have your agents been able to inform you which of our conquests are being targeted?"

Nom Anor felt a cold hand run up his spine. He had seen what happened to some of those who disappointed the great Overlord Shimrra, and he knew his answer would be a disappointment.

"Unfortunately, Supreme One, it appears that the new administration is giving the local commanders a great deal of latitude. They're choosing their own targets. Our agents on Mon Calamari have no way of knowing what objectives the individual commanders may select."

There was a moment of silence. "The new head of state, this infidel Cal Omas, permits his subordinates such freedom?"

Nom Anor bowed. "So it appears, Supreme One."

"Then he has no true concept of leadership. His rule will not trouble us much longer."

Nom Anor, who thought otherwise, chose not to dispute this analysis. "The Supreme One is wise," he said instead.

"You must redouble your efforts to infiltrate the military and provide us with their objectives."

"I shall obey, Supreme One."

"What news of the Peace Brigade?"

"The news is mixed." The collaborationist Peace Brigade government had been established on Ylesia, and had grown sufficiently large and diverse to have divided into squabbling factions, all of which competed ferociously in groveling to the Yuuzhan Vong. None of this cringing actually aided the creation of the Peace Brigade army and fleet, which, when built up to strength and trained, were to act as auxiliaries to the Yuuzhan Vong.

"Perhaps it should be admitted that infidels so disposed as to join an organization called the 'Peace Brigade' may not be temperamentally inclined toward war," Nom Anor said.

"They need a leader to exact obedience," Shimrra concluded.

"That role was to be assigned to the infidel Viqui Shesh, Supreme One," Nom Anor said.

"Another leader shall be assigned," Shimrra said. His eyes shimmered from blue to green to yellow. "We should choose someone who has nothing to do with these factions. Someone from outside, who can impose discipline."

Nom Anor agreed, but when he searched his mind for candidates, no names occurred to him. "We are having better luck with infidel mercenaries," he said. "They have made no true submission and possess no loyalty, but they are convinced they have joined the winning side, and are content to obey so long as we pay them."

"Contemptible creatures. No wonder a galaxy that spawned such as these was given by the gods to us."

"Indeed, Supreme One."

Shimrra shifted his huge form on his dais, and one of the polyps beneath him burst under the pressure, spraying the wall with its insides. An acid reek filled the room. The other polyps at once turned on the injured creature and began to divide and devour it.

Shimrra ignored the clacking and slurping. "Speak of our visitor from Corellia."

Nom Anor bowed. "He is called Thrackan Sal-Solo."

"Solo? He is related to the twin *Jeedaa*?"

"The two branches of the family are estranged, Supreme One."

A thoughtful rumble came from the dais. "A pity. If otherwise, we could hold him hostage and demand the twins in exchange."

"That is indeed a pity, Lord."

Shimrra waved one huge hand. "Continue, Executor."

"Sal-Solo is the leader of a large political faction on Corellia, and has been elected governor-general of the Corellian sector. He says that, with our support, he can assure that the Corellian system—five planets—is detached from the infidel government. Once this is done, he can assure its neutrality, including the neutrality of the Centerpoint weapon that so devastated our force at Fondor. Then, as diktat, he will sign a treaty of friendship with us."

Shimrra shifted thoughtfully on the pulsing bed. The dismembered polyp twitched and fluttered as its siblings consumed it.

"Is this infidel trustworthy, Executor?"

"Of course not, Supreme One." Nom Anor made a deprecatory gesture. "But he may be useful. He gave us the location of the Jedi academy, and that information was correct, and led to our colonization of the Yavin system. Corellia is a major industrial center, where many weapons and enemy ships are built, and its neutrality is desirable."

"What is our information on the Centerpoint weapon?"

“Sal-Solo did not come alone. He brought with him a supporter and companion, a human female called Darjeelai Swan. While I interviewed Sal-Solo, we took his companion and interrogated her. According to this person, the Centerpoint weapon is not functional, though efforts are being made by New Republic military forces to rehabilitate it.”

“So this Sal-Solo offers to trade us what he does not have.”

“True. And—also according to Darjeelai Swan—it was Sal-Solo himself who fired the Centerpoint weapon at our fleet at Fondor.”

Shimrra’s hands—giant black taloned things, each implanted from a different carnivore—made massive fists. “And this creature has the effrontery to bargain with me?”

“Indeed, Supreme One.”

Onimi piped up,

“Fetch him to our presence, Lord,

And bring us all into concord.

I wish it known and made a rule

That I am not the only fool.”

Shimrra’s vast frame heaved with what might have been laughter.

“Yes,” he said. “By all means. Let us meet the master of Corellia.”

Nom Anor bowed in response, then hesitated. “Shall I bring his guards, as well?”

Contempt rang in Shimrra’s answer. “I am capable of defending myself against anything this infidel should attempt.”

“As you desire, Supreme One.”

Like most humans Thrackan Sal-Solo was a thin, ill-muscled creature, with hair and beard growing white with age. His eyes widened as he entered the chamber and perceived, in the darkness, Shimrra’s burning rainbow eyes. Nevertheless he summoned a degree of swagger, and approached the Supreme Overlord on the pulsing polyp bed.

“Lord Shimrra,” he said, crossed his arms, and gave an all-too-brief bow.

Nom Anor reacted without thought. One sweep of his booted foot knocked the human’s legs out from under him, and a precise shove dropped the startled Corellian onto his face.

Onimi giggled.

“Grovel before your lord!” Nom Anor shouted. “Grovel for your life!”

"I come in peace, Lord Shimrra!" Sal-Solo protested.

Nom Anor drove a boot into Sal-Solo's ribs. "Silence! You will wait for instruction!" He turned to Shimrra and translated the human's words.

"The infidel says that he comes in peace, Supreme One."

"That is well." Shimrra contemplated the splayed human figure for a moment. "Tell the infidel that I have considered his proposals and have decided to accept."

Nom Anor translated the overlord's words into Basic. Sal-Solo's face, pressed against the floor, displayed what might have been a trace of a smile.

"Tell the Supreme Overlord that he is wise," he said.

Nom Anor didn't bother to translate. "Your opinions are of no interest to the Supreme Overlord."

Sal-Solo licked his lips nervously. "The only way I can guarantee the success of the plan is to be given a free hand in Corellia," he said.

Nom Anor translated this.

"Tell the infidel he misunderstands," Shimrra said. "Tell him that the only way the plan will succeed is if *I* am given a free hand in Corellia."

Sal-Solo looked startled as this was translated, and his lips began to frame a protest, but Shimrra continued.

"Tell the infidel that we will give his associates in the Centerpoint Party all assistance necessary to gain control of the Corellian system. He will direct them to cooperate with us. Once Centerpoint Station is taken by his people and surrendered to our forces, the Centerpoint Party will rule Corellia in a state of peace with the Yuuzhan Vong."

Sal-Solo's eyes widened as he listened to Nom Anor's lengthy translation. The executor did not bother to state the fact that, in the Yuuzhan Vong language, *peace* was the same word as *submission*.

Sal-Solo would find that out in time.

Sal-Solo licked his lips again, and said, "May I stand, Executor?"

Nom Anor considered this. "Very well," he said. "But you must show complete submission to the Supreme Overlord."

Sal-Solo rose to his feet but didn't straighten, instead maintaining a sort of half bow toward Shimrra. His eyes ticked back and forth, as if he were mentally reading a speech before giving it, and then he said, "Supreme One, I beg permission to explain the situation on Corellia in more detail."

Permission was given. Sal-Solo spoke about the complex political relations at Corellia, the Centerpoint Party's desire to cast off the New

Republic. As he spoke he seemed to grow in confidence, and he paced back and forth, occasionally raising his eyes to Shimrra to see if the Supreme Overlord was following his argument.

Nom Anor translated as well as he could. Onimi, from his posture at Shimrra's feet, watched with his upper lip curled back and one misshapen fang exposed.

"I shall have to return to Corellia immediately in order to undertake the Supreme One's plan," Sal-Solo said. "And regretfully I must warn that it will be difficult to gain cooperation once it is known that the Yuuzhan Vong plan to seize the Centerpoint weapon after we evict the New Republic military."

"The answer to that difficulty is a simple one," Shimrra said through Nom Anor. "*Do not tell* your associates that the Yuuzhan Vong are destined to control the weapon."

Sal-Solo hesitated only a fraction of a second before he bowed. "It shall be as the Supreme Overlord desires," he said.

Shimrra gave an appreciative growl, then turned to Nom Anor. "Is the infidel lying?" he said.

"Of course, Supreme One," Nom Anor said. "He will never voluntarily relinquish a weapon as powerful as the Centerpoint device."

"Then tell the infidel this," Shimrra said. "It will not be necessary for him to return to Corellia—he will simply inform us which of his Centerpoint Party associates we should contact in order to deliver his orders and our assistance. Tell the infidel that I have a much more important duty for him to perform. Tell him that I have just appointed him President of Ylesia and Commander in Chief of the Peace Brigade."

Nom Anor was struck with admiration. *Now that is truly inventive vengeance*, he thought. Thrackan Sal-Solo had destroyed thousands of Yuuzhan Vong warriors at Fondor, and now he would be publicly linked with a Yuuzhan Vong-allied government. His reputation would be destroyed; he would be at the mercy of those whose warriors he had killed.

Sal-Solo listened to the translation in horrified silence. His eyes ticked back and forth again, and then he said, "Please tell the Supreme Overlord that I am deeply honored by an appointment to this position of trust, but because this would make it impossible for his plans for Corellia to be realized, I regret that I must decline the appointment. Perhaps the Supreme Overlord doesn't realize that the Peace Brigade is not admired by all

Corellians, and that anyone identified as Peace Brigade wouldn't be able to command the respect necessary to win power in Corellia. It is, furthermore, absolutely necessary that I be in Corellia to coordinate the Centerpoint Party, and . . ."

Sal-Solo went on at some length, long enough so that Nom Anor began to feel toward him a thorough contempt. Sal-Solo, convinced of his powers to charm others, thought that once he could get in the same room with Shimrra, he could talk to him, one politician to another, and convince him of the rightness of his schemes. As if he could lobby the Supreme Overlord of the Yuuzhan Vong the same way as he might lobby some miserable Senator from his homeworld!

"Executor," Shimrra said conversationally, as Sal-Solo continued to speak, "is there a place where one might strike a human in order to cause immobilizing pain?"

Nom Anor considered the request. "There are organs known as 'kidneys,' Lord. One on either side of the lower back, just above the hips. A strike there causes considerable anguish, often so severe that the victim is unable to cry out. Or so I am given to understand."

"Let us find out," Shimrra said. He made a slight gesture, and Onimi rose from his place at the foot of Shimrra's dais. In the dim light Nom Anor saw, coiled in the Shamed One's hand, a baton of rank, the officers' version of the amphistaff. He was shocked to discover that Shimrra permitted his familiar to carry weapons.

But who else would be more trustworthy? Nom Anor thought. *Onimi must know that if Shimrra is killed, his own death will surely follow.*

Onimi stepped behind Sal-Solo and flung out his lank arm. The whiplike baton froze into its solid form, now a lean staff, and Onimi with a single efficient swing slashed the weapon into Sal-Solo's left kidney.

The human opened his mouth in a silent scream and fell like a bundle of sticks, hands scrabbling at the floor. Nom Anor stepped to the helpless man, bent, and seized him by the hair.

"Your resignation is declined, infidel," he said. "We shall see you are transported immediately to Ylesia, where you may take your place as head of the government. In the meantime, you will give us the names of your associates on Corellia, so they, too, may be given their instructions."

Sal-Solo's face was still distorted by an unvoiced shriek, and Nom Anor decided that his information regarding a human's vulnerable kidneys was true.

"Nod your head if you understand, infidel," Nom Anor said.

Sal-Solo nodded.

Nom Anor turned to Shimrra. "Does the Supreme One have any further instructions for his servants?" he asked.

"Yes," Shimrra said. "Instruct that human's guards well."

"I shall, Lord."

Nom Anor prostrated himself beside Sal-Solo's shuddering body, and then he and Onimi carried Thrackan Sal-Solo to his guards, who managed to stand the man upright.

"I believe I address you as 'President' from this point," Nom Anor said.

Sal-Solo's lips moved, but again he seemed unable to utter a sound.

"By the way, Your Excellency," Nom Anor continued, "I regret to say that your companion Darjeelai Swan died while furnishing the Yuuzhan Vong information. Is there anything you wish done with the body?"

Sal-Solo again voiced no opinion, so Nom Anor ordered the body destroyed and went about his business.

The pale form of the cruiser *Ralroost* floated in brilliant contrast to the green jungles of Kashyyyk below, the immaculate white paint of its hull a proof that the assault cruiser served as the flagship of a fleet admiral and was maintained to the standard that befitted his rank. Around the cruiser were grouped the elements of an entire fleet—frigates, cruisers, Star Destroyers, tenders, hospital ships, support vessels, and flights of starfighters on patrol—all formed and ready for their next excursion into Yuuzhan Vong-controlled space.

Jacen Solo watched the swarming fleet elements through the shuttle's forward viewport. The outlines of the warships seemed too *hard* somehow, too defined, a little alien, lacking the softer outlines of the organic life-forms he had grown accustomed to while a prisoner of the Yuuzhan Vong.

"Bets, anyone?" came his sister's voice. "Where's the next raid? Hutt space? Duro? Yavin?"

"I'd like to see Yavin again," Jacen said.

"Not once you see what the Vong have done to it."

He turned at the bitter tone in Jaina's voice. She stood slightly behind him, her intent gaze directed toward *Ralroost*. A major's insignia was pinned to the collar of her dress uniform, and a lightsaber hung from her belt.

Yavin was our childhood, Jacen thought. And the Yuuzhan Vong had taken that childhood away, and Yavin with it, and left Jaina a grown woman, hard and brittle and single-minded, with little patience for anything but leading her squadron against the enemy.

Sword of the Jedi. That's what Uncle Luke had named her at the ceremony that had raised her to the rank of Jedi Knight. *A burning brand to your enemies, a brilliant fire to your friends*. That's what Luke had said.

"I think it will be Hutt space myself," Jaina said. "In Hutt space the Yuuzhan Vong have had their own way for too long."

Yours is a restless life, and never shall you know peace, though you shall be blessed for the peace that you bring to others.

Luke had said that as well. Jacen felt an urge to comfort his sister, and he put an arm around her shoulders. She didn't reject the touch, but she didn't accept it either: he felt as if his arm were draped around a form made of hardened durasteel.

It didn't matter, Jacen thought, if she accepted or rejected his help. He would make his aid available whether she wanted it or not. Luke had offered him a choice of assignments, and he had chosen the one that would place him near Jaina.

When Anakin had died, and Jacen had at the same time been made a prisoner of the Yuuzhan Vong, Jaina had allowed herself to be overcome by despair. The dark side had claimed her, and though she had fought her way out of that abyss, she was still more fragile than Jacen would have liked. She had grown fey, haunted by death, by the memories of Chewbacca and Anakin and Anni Capstan and all the many thousands who had died. To his horror Jaina had told him that she didn't expect to survive the war.

It wasn't despair, she insisted; she'd beaten despair when she conquered the dark side. It was just a realistic appraisal of the odds.

Jacen had wanted to protest that if you expect death, you won't fight for life. And so he volunteered for duty with the fleet at Kashyyyk, determined that if Jaina wouldn't fight her utmost to preserve her life, he would fight that battle on her behalf.

"I think Yavin is a good bet for the next strike," another voice said. "We've had squadrons clearing Yuuzhan Vong raiders off the Hydian Way, as if they're preparing a route for us. We might soon find ourselves moving in that direction."

Corran Horn stepped to the viewport. The Rogue Squadron commander wore a battered colonel's uniform that dated from the wars against the Empire.

"Yavin," he said, "Bimmial, Dathomir . . . somewhere out there."

A polite hissing signaled a disagreement. "We forget the enemy are behind us," hissed Saba Sebatyne. "If we take Bimmisaari and Kessel the enemy will be cut in two."

"That would bring on a major battle," Corran said. "We don't have the strength to fight one."

"Yet . . ." Jaina said, and through their twin bond Jacen felt the fierce power of her calculation. She had probably reckoned to the day when the New Republic would have the power to shift to the offensive, and could hardly wait.

The *Sword of the Jedi* wanted to strike to the enemy's heart.

The shuttle swept into *Ralroost's* docking bay and settled onto its landing gear. The droid pilot, a metal head and torso wired onto the instrument console, opened the shuttle doors. Its head spun clean around on its shoulders to face them.

"I hope you enjoyed your ride, Masters. Please watch your step as you exit."

The four Jedi stepped out of the shuttle onto Admiral Kre'fey's pristine deck. Scores of people bustled about, rode hovercarts, or worked on starfighters. Most were furred Bothans, but among them were a fair number of humans and other species of the galaxy. Jacen was suddenly conscious that he was the only person present without a military uniform.

They stepped toward the bulkhead, with its open blast doors that led forward to the ship's command center. Above the open doors was a sign:

how can i hurt the vong today?

This was what Admiral Kre'fey called his Question Number One, which everyone in his command was to ask her- or himself every day.

In a few moments, Jacen thought, he'd hear an answer to that question.

Jacen craned his head as he passed through the blast doors, and on the other side he saw Kre'fey's Question Number Two.

how can i help my own side grow stronger?

The answer to *that* question was going to be a little harder to find.

The four Jedi reported to Snayd, Admiral Kre'fey's aide, who took them to a conference room. Jacen followed the others into the room, and in the dim light he first saw the Bothan admiral Traest Kre'fey, who stood out by virtue of the unusual color of his fur, the same brilliant white as *Ralroost's* paint. As Jacen's eyes adjusted to the room's darkness he saw other military officers, including General Farlander, and another group of Jedi who were quartered on the cruiser. Alema Rar, Zekk, and Tahiri Veila. Jacen felt the welcoming presence of the others greeting him in the Force, and he sent his own warm reply.

"Greetings!" Kre'fey returned the salutes of the three military Jedi, and stepped forward to clasp Jacen's hand. "Welcome to *Ralroost*, young Jedi."

"Thank you, Admiral." Unlike other military commanders, Kre'fey had been happy to work with Jedi in the past, and had sent a specific request to Luke Skywalker for more Jedi warriors.

"I hope you'll be able to help us in this next mission," the admiral said.

"That's why we're here, sir."

"Fine! Fine." Kre'fey turned to the others. "Please be seated. We'll begin as soon as Master Durrion joins us."

Jacen seated himself in an armchair next to Tahiri Veila, the soft, smooth leather embracing his body. The little blond Jedi gave him a shy smile, her bare feet swinging clear of the carpet beneath her.

"How are you faring?" he asked.

Her wide eyes turned thoughtful as she considered the question. "I'm better," she said. "The meld is helping a lot."

The fierce, impulsive Tahiri had loved Jacen's brother Anakin, and had been present at Myrkr when Anakin had met his hero's death. Devastated by Anakin's passing, her fiery character had come close to being snuffed out. She had withdrawn, and though she had continued to function as a Jedi, it was as if she were only going through the motions. Her impetuous personality had vanished into a subdued, ominously quiet young woman.

It had been Saba Sebatyne, the reptilian leader of the all-Jedi Wild Knights Squadron, who had suggested that Tahiri should be sent to join Admiral Kre'fey at Kashyyyk. Kre'fey wanted as many Jedi as possible under his command, to form a Jedi Force-meld in combat, all the Jedi linked together through the Force and acting as one. Saba insisted that the Force-

meld would help a wounded mind heal, by drawing a Jedi in pain toward light and healing.

Apparently Saba had been right.

"I'm glad to know you're doing better," Jacen said. His own experience with the meld, on Myrkr, had been more ambiguous: if it amplified Jedi abilities, it also enlarged any disharmony that existed among them.

Tahiri gave Jacen a quick smile and patted his arm briefly. "I'm glad you're here, Jacen."

"Thank you. I wanted to be here. It seemed to be where I was needed."

He wanted to experience the meld again. He thought it could teach him a great deal.

The doors slid open, Kyp Durrone entered, and at once the mood of the room seemed to shift. Some people, Jacen thought, carried a kind of aura with them. If you met Cilghal, you knew at once you were in the presence of a compassionate healer, and Luke Skywalker radiated authority and wisdom.

When you looked at Kyp Durrone, you knew you were seeing an enormously powerful weapon. If only Jacen didn't know how erratic that weapon had been.

The dark-haired, older Jedi wore a New Republic-style uniform without any insignia, to show that he led an all-volunteer squadron that fought alongside the military forces but was not formally a part of them.

Kyp and his unit, the Dozen, had always gone their own way. They flew with Kre'fey not because they were under orders, but because they chose to.

Kyp and the admiral exchanged salutes. "Sorry I'm late, Admiral," Kyp said. He showed the datapad he carried in one hand. "I was getting the latest intelligence reports. And, uh—" He hesitated. "—some of the data were kind of interesting."

"Very good, Master Durrone." Kre'fey turned to the others. "Master Durrone has submitted a plan for action against the enemy. As it's fully in line with our operational goals as established by Admirals Sovv and Ackbar, I've given it my tentative approval. I thought I would place it before my senior commanders, and you squadron commanders, to see if you might have anything to add."

Jacen looked at Tahiri, startled. She was a squadron commander? Her feet would barely reach the foot controls in a starfighter cockpit.

And then, as what he'd heard struck home, he exchanged a quick glance with his sister. Kyp Durrón's plans, in the past, had been aggressive in the extreme; at Sernpidal he'd tricked Jaina and the New Republic military into destroying a Yuuzhan Vong shipwomb, thus stranding untold numbers of Yuuzhan Vong in intergalactic space and dooming them to a cold, lingering death.

Kyp was said to have changed in the months since then, and had been appointed to the High Council that advised the Chief of State and oversaw Jedi activities. But Jacen was prepared to examine carefully any plan put forward by Kyp Durrón before he could bring himself to approve it.

Kre'fey surrendered his place at the head of the room and seated himself on a thronelike armchair. Kyp nodded to the admiral, then swept the others with his dark eyes. Jacen sensed Kyp's firmness of purpose, his conviction.

He also thought that it was a good idea to be wary of Kyp's conviction.

"When the Vong struck at us," Kyp said, "their way had been prepared for them. They had agents already in place, both disguised Yuuzhan Vong and traitors like Viqi Shesh. And after our first encounters with the Yuuzhan Vong, the enemy found there were tens of thousands of people who were willing to collaborate with them in attacking and enslaving their fellow galactic citizens."

He gave a shrug. "I'm not willing to speculate why the Peace Brigade and their ilk chose to work with the invaders. Maybe some are simply cowards, maybe some were bought, maybe some were given no choice. I suppose most of them are opportunists who think they're on the winning side. But I know this—up until now there's been no real penalty for being willing to betray the New Republic and work with the invaders." The amber room lights glowed in Kyp's eyes. "I propose we inflict a penalty," he said firmly. "I propose that we strike the Peace Brigade right in the center of their power. I say we raid Ylesia, their capital, destroy the collaborationist government, and show everyone in the galaxy that there *is* a penalty for collaboration with the Yuuzhan Vong, and that the penalty is a dire one."

There was a moment of silence, and Jacen again turned to Jaina. *You were right*, he thought. *Hutt space after all.*

Corran Horn raised a hand. "What kind of opposition might we expect?"

Kyp pressed the datapad in his hand, and a number of surreptitiously taken holos were projected on the wall behind him. "We have no permanent intelligence presence on Ylesia," he admitted, "but Ylesia's most profitable

export is glitterstim spice, and a number of New Republic agents have scouted the planet while posing as crew from the merchant ships. They report few Yuuzhan Vong warriors—most of the Vong on the ground seem to be members of the intendant class, who help the Peace Brigade run their government.

“There haven’t been any Yuuzhan Vong fleets in orbit since the original conquest, though sometimes Vong fleet elements, mostly coralskippers and their transports, transit the Ylesia system on their way to somewhere else. What we have instead is the Peace Brigade military itself—the Yuuzhan Vong are trying to build up the Brigaders as an ‘independent’ government, with their own fleet. They’re also using glitterstim revenues to hire mercenaries. Here are the agents’ estimates of what we might be up against.”

More figures flashed on the screen. “Mostly starfighters, a mixed bag,” Kyp continued. “There are a dozen or so capital ships—Intelligence thinks they were probably in dry dock in places like Gyndine and Obroa-skai when the Vong captured them. The Vong then completed the repairs with slave labor and handed the ships to their allies.”

“It looks easy,” Tahiri said softly in Jacen’s ear. “But I don’t believe in easy anymore.”

Jacen nodded. He couldn’t bring himself to believe in easy, either.

Kre’fey rose from his chair. “Excellent, Master Durrón!” he boomed. “I will commit fleet resources to this, including interdicator ships—enough to assure that this so-called fleet can’t escape! Fifteen squadrons of starfighters! Three squadrons of capital ships—we’ll outnumber the enemy three to one!” He held up a white-furred hand and then drew the fingers together, as if capturing an enemy fleet in his fist. “And then we’ll sit above the enemy and obliterate their capital from orbit.”

Jacen felt a mental hesitation from every Jedi in the room. Even Kyp Durrón’s face reflected uncertainty.

Tahiri’s voice piped up instantly. “What about civilian casualties?”

Kre’fey made a deprecatory gesture. “The population of Ylesia is very scattered,” he said. “The civilians were slaves of the Hutts, working in glitterstim packing plants scattered over the countryside, and now they’re slaves of the Vong—or of the Peace Brigade, it’s hard to say which. The town the Peace Brigaders are using as their capital used to be called Colony One, but now it’s Peace City, and there are few slaves there. Most of the city’s inhabitants are collaborators, and they’re guilty by definition.”

Kyp Durrone gave a solemn glance to his datapad. "The latest reports have slave barracks all over Colony One. They're constructing palaces for the leaders of the Peace Brigade, and a building to house their Senate." He paused. "And they were excavating one very large shelter, just in case someone tried orbital bombardment."

"Destruction would be awfully random," Tahiri said.

Kre'fey nodded, then stepped toward her and looked at her with what seemed to be great respect. "I esteem the Jedi traditions of compassion for the innocent, and of precise personal combat with an enemy," he said. "But my own people don't have your training. It would be too great a danger to send them to the planet to sort out the innocent from the guilty, and I don't want to lose good troops in a ground fight when I could accomplish the mission from orbit in safety." Kre'fey turned to Kyp. "All that shelter would require is increased firepower, and then we get *all* of them in one go." His eyes traveled from one Jedi to the next. "Remember who we're dealing with. They destroyed entire worlds by seeding alien life-forms from orbit. Just think what they did to Ithor. What we're doing is merciful by comparison." He shook his head sadly. "And those slaves would be dead anyway, within a year or two, just from overwork."

Jacen could see the logic in Kre'fey's argument—and he had to admire a powerful, important fleet admiral who would bother to engage in a serious debate with a fifteen-year-old—but he could also see the reverse of Kre'fey's position. Killing civilians was something *the enemy* did. The fact that the civilians were slaves made their deaths even more unjust—the New Republic forces should be *liberating* the slaves, so that even if the Hutts returned they would have no workers for their wretched factories . . .

"Let's capture the government instead," Jacen said, the idea occurring to him even as he spoke it aloud.

Kre'fey looked at him in surprise. "Jacen?" he said.

Jacen turned his face up to Kre'fey. "If we *captured* the Brigaders' government, and put them on trial and exiled them to some prison planet, wouldn't that be more of a propaganda coup than simply bombing them?" He forced a smile. "They'll all be in one shelter, right? As you say, that should make it easy."

"Jacen has a point," Kyp said, from over Kre'fey's shoulder. "If we destroy Peace City, we make an announcement and then it's forgotten. But if we put the traitors on trial, that would be on the HoloNet for *weeks*.

Anyone thinking of switching sides would have to think twice, and any collaborators would be shaking in their boots.”

“Not only that,” Jacen said, “but a team could be landed in Peace City to become our permanent intelligence presence in the enemy capital, and perhaps to organize the underground there.”

Kre’fey’s long head turned from Jacen to Kyp and back again. He tugged at his white-furred chin in thought. “This requires a more elaborate mission—perhaps you do not realize how much more elaborate. With the original plan there’s very little that can go wrong. We transit to the system, engage, win our victory, and leave. If the enemy are too strong, we run without a fight. But with Jacen’s idea we’d need transports, drop ships, ground forces. If things go wrong on the ground, we’ll take a lot of casualties just getting our people away. If things go wrong above the planet, the forces on the ground may be stranded there.”

“Sir,” Jaina said, “I volunteer to lead the ground forces.”

The Sword of the Jedi, Jacen thought, thrusting straight to the heart.

Kyp turned to Jaina, his voice hesitant. “I, uh—“ For once in his life Jacen was privileged to watch Kyp Durrón embarrassed. “I really don’t think that would be a good idea, Sticks.”

Jaina’s eyes flashed, but her voice was very controlled. “You don’t have to be so protective of me, Master Durrón,” she said.

Surprise rose in Jacen. He sensed history here, something between Jaina and Kyp that he hadn’t known existed.

Now *that’s* interesting.

“Ah, that’s not it,” Kyp said hastily. “It’s just that—“ He looked at his datapad. “The latest news from Ylesia indicates that you have a personal relationship with, ah, one of our potential captives.” And, as Jaina’s indignation increased, Kyp turned to Jacen as his embarrassment deepened. “And Jacen, too, of course.”

“Jacen, too?” Jaina demanded, outraged.

Kyp looked at the datapad again and shrugged. “The Peace Brigade just announced their new President. He’s, ah, your cousin Thrackan.”

Confusion swept Jaina’s face. “That doesn’t make any sense,” Jacen said immediately.

“Sorry,” Kyp said, “I know he’s a member of your family, but...”

“No,” Jacen said, “that’s not it. I’m not going to defend Thrackan Sal-Solo because he’s a distant *cousin*—“

“A cousin who’s vicious as a slashrat and slippery as an Umgullian blob,” Jaina added.

Jacen took a breath and continued, intent on making his point. “I was only going to point out,” he said, “that it doesn’t make any sense because Thrackan is a human chauvinist. He’s always wanted to run Corellia so he could throw the other species *out*. He’d never make a deal if that meant he’d have to collaborate with an alien species.”

Kyp looked dubious. “I suppose the story could be false,” he said, “but it’s all over the HoloNet, complete with pictures of your cousin taking his oath of office in front of the Peace Brigade Senate.”

Jacen saw Jaina’s face harden. “Right,” she said, “now I’ve *got* to be with the ground party.”

“Me, too, I guess,” Jacen said. “It’ll be . . . enlightening . . . to see cousin Thrackan again.”

Traest Kre’fey looked from Jaina to Jacen and back again.

“I must say,” he said, “that the two of you belong to the most *interesting* family.”

Admiral Kre’fey continued his show of reluctance, but eventually he set his staff to “exploring” the possibility of a landing to capture the Peace Brigade leadership. By the time Jaina entered the shuttle that would take her party back to their quarters on the old Dreadnaught *Starsider*, she was already calculating her deployments for the battle—she’d leave Tesar in command of Twin Suns Squadron and take Lowbacca onto the ground with her. She’d like Tesar with her, too, but a Jedi would have to stay with the squadron and keep it connected to the meld . . . and keep her new pilots from doing anything foolish, as well.

Before the operation she’d get her squadron as much practice as she could fit into their schedule. The military had taken half her veteran pilots to use as a cadre around which to build new squadrons, filling their slots with rookies, inexperienced pilots who needed all the drill Jaina could give them.

The New Republic’s industries were finally on a war footing and pouring out war matériel by the millions of tons. All the personnel losses the military had suffered in the war had been replaced—but with raw recruits. What had been lost was *experience*. Jaina was terrified of Twin Suns Squadron being committed to a major battle before her new pilots were ready.

That's why she was a supporter of Kre'fey's current strategy of raiding the enemy only where the Yuuzhan Vong were vulnerable. His raids were staged only against weak targets, building morale and experience against an enemy guaranteed to lose.

She could only hope the Yuuzhan Vong didn't move against Kashyyyk, or Corellia or Kuat or Mon Calamari—a place where the New Republic would *have* to fight. That would be a conflagration in which Twin Suns Squadron would be lucky to survive . . .

"Odd to think of Tahiri as a squadron commander."

Jacen's comment interrupted Jaina's thoughts.

"Tahiri's doing all right," Jaina said.

"She's not a crack pilot, though."

"She's more experienced than most of her pilots—almost all of them are green—and she fought well at Borleias. Kre'fey's given her a good executive officer to help her with organization and red tape." She smiled. "Her pilots are very protective of her. They call themselves Barefoot Squadron."

Jacen smiled also. "That's good of them."

Jaina sighed. "The Barefoots' real problem is the same one most of us have—too high a percentage of rookie pilots." She looked at Saba and Corran Horn. "*Some* commanders get all the luck."

Horn's mouth gave a little quirk. "Saba has the true elite force here. What I wouldn't give for a roster made up of Jedi . . ."

Saba's eyes gave a reptilian glimmer, and her tail twitched. "A pity you humanz lack the advantage of hatchmatez."

Horn raised an eyebrow. "*Hatching* Jedi. Now *that's* an interesting idea."

Saba hissed amusement. "I can testify that it workz."

"I hope you enjoyed your ride, Masters." The head of the droid pilot spun on its neck. "Please watch your step as you exit."

A few minutes later, after they'd separated from their companions and begun walking toward their quarters along one of *Starsider's* avenues, Jaina turned to Jacen.

"Kre'fey will give you a squadron," she said. "I'm surprised he hasn't asked you already."

"I don't want one."

"Why not?" Jaina asked, more snappishly than she intended. Jacen had always been on a quest for the deeper meaning of things, and that meant

that occasionally he'd give something up just to find out what it meant. For a while he'd given up being a warrior, and he'd given up use of the Force, and for all intents and purposes given up being a Jedi . . . now he was giving up being a *pilot*?

The one thing he hadn't given up was being exasperating.

"I can pilot and fight well enough," Jacen said, "but I'm rusty on military procedure and comm protocols and tactics. I'd rather fly for a while as an ordinary pilot before I'm given responsibility over eleven other lives."

"Oh," Jaina was abashed. "You could fly with Tahiri, then. Another Jedi in her squadron would be a boon to her."

"But not this next mission," Jacen said. "Not Ylesia. I want to fly with you, since we're both going on the landing party."

Jaina nodded. "That makes sense," she said. "We'll find a slot for you."

Jacen seemed uneasy. "What do you think about Kyp Durrón's plan?" he asked. "Do you see a secret agenda here?"

"I think Kyp's past that sort of thing. It's *your* plan that worries me."

Jacen was taken aback. "To capture the Brigader leadership? Why?"

"Kre'fey was right when he said there was a lot that could go wrong. We don't have enough data on Ylesia to make certain the landings will go as planned."

"But you agreed to join the ground party."

Jaina sighed. "Yes. But now I wonder if we oughtn't leave Ylesia alone until we have a more seasoned force and better intelligence."

Jacen had no answer to this, so they plodded up the corridor without speaking, stepping carefully past a droid polishing the deck. The scent of polish wafted after them. Then Jacen broke the silence.

"What's with you and Kyp Durrón? I sensed something a little odd there."

Jaina felt herself flush. "Kyp's been feeling a little . . . sentimental . . . toward me lately."

Jacen looked at her in solemn surprise. It was that solemnity, Jaina decided, that she disliked most about him.

"He's a little old for you, don't you think?" Jacen asked. Solemnly.

Jaina tried to throttle her annoyance at this line of questioning. "I'm grateful to Kyp for helping me come back from the dark side," she said. "But with me, it's gratitude. With Kyp . . ." She hesitated. "I'd rather not go into it. Anyway, it's over now."

Jacen nodded. Solemnly. Jaina came to her cabin door and put her hand on the latch.

“Good,” Jacen said. “Because you’ve been conquering a bewildering number of hearts while I was away. First Baron Fel’s son, and now the most unpredictable Jedi in the order . . .”

Supremely irritated, Jaina opened the cabin door, stepped inside, and in the darkness of the cabin was seized by a pair of arms. Pressure was applied in an expert way to her elbow joints, and she was whirled around. A familiar scent, a spicy aroma from the Unknown Regions, filled her senses, and a hungry mouth descended on hers.

A moment later—and the length of that moment was something she would not forgive herself—it occurred to her to resist. Her arms were securely pinned, so she summoned the Force and flung her assailant across the room. There was a crash, and items tumbled off a shelf. Jaina took a step to the door and waved on the lights.

Jagged Fel lay sprawled across her bed. He touched the back of his head gingerly.

“Couldn’t you just have slapped me?” he asked.

“What are you doing here?”

“Conducting an experiment.”

“A *what*?” Furious.

His pale green eyes rose to meet hers. “I detected a degree of ambiguity in your last few messages,” he said. “I could no longer tell what your feelings toward me might be, so I thought an experiment was in order. I decided to place you in a situation that wasn’t the least bit ambiguous, and see how you reacted.” An insufferable smile touched the corners of his mouth. “And the experiment was a success.”

“Right. You got thrown into the wall.”

“But before you remembered to be outraged, there was a moment that was worth all the pain.” His eyes turned to the door. “Hello there, galactic hero. Your mother told me you’d escaped.”

“She mentioned she’d met you.” Jacen, in the doorway, turned his owlsh expression to Jaina. “Sis, do you need rescuing?”

“Get out of here,” Jaina said.

“Right.” He turned back to Jagged Fel. “Nice seeing you again, Jag.”

"Give my regards to the folks," Jag said, and sketched a salute near his scarred forehead. The door slid shut behind Jacen. Jag looked at Jaina and removed from his lap some of the objects that had fallen from her shelf.

"May I stand up?" he said. "Or would you just knock me down again?"

"Try it and see."

Jag elected to remain seated. Jaina folded her arms and leaned against the wall as far from Jag as the small cabin would permit.

"Last I heard you were clearing Vong off the Hydian Way," she said.

He nodded. "That's where I met your parents. It's important work. If the routes from the Rim to what's left of the Core are broken, the New Republic would be broken into—well—into even smaller fragments than it is now."

"Thanks for the lecture. I never would have guessed any of that in a million years." She frowned down at him. "So you left this important work in order to sneak into my cabin and conduct your experiment?"

"No, that was by way of a bonus." Jag swept a hand over his dark short-cropped hair. "We're here for routine maintenance. Since my squadron flies Chiss clawcraft that aren't in the New Republic inventory, it's difficult to find maintenance facilities geared to our requirements. Fortunately Admiral Kre'fey's Star Destroyers have all the equipment necessary to maintain Sienar Fleet Systems TIE fighter command pods, and their machine shops should be able to create anything we need for our Chiss wing pylons." He smiled up at her. "A lucky coincidence, don't you think?"

Jaina felt herself softening. "I've got six rookie pilots," she said. "And there's an operation coming up."

He gave her an inquiring look. "You weren't planning on taking them out on an exercise at this very moment, were you?"

"I—" She hesitated. "No. You've got me there. But there's a ton of administrative work, and—"

"Jaina," he said. "Please allow me to observe, one officer to another, that it is not necessary to do all the work yourself. You absolutely must learn to delegate. You have two capable, veteran lieutenants in Lowbacca and Tesar Sebatyne, and not only will it aid *you* if you share the work with them, it will aid *their* development as officers."

Jaina permitted herself a thin smile. "So it's to the benefit of my officers and pilots to spend the evening in my cabin alone with you?"

He nodded. "Precisely."

“Do you play sabacc?”

Jag was surprised. “Yes. Of course.”

“Let’s have a game, then. There’s a very nice sabacc table in the wardroom.”

He looked at her mutely. She broadened her smile and said, “I played your little game, here in the darkened cabin. Now you can play mine.”

Jag sighed heavily, then rose and stood by the door. As she walked past him to open the door, he clasped his hands behind his back.

“I should point out,” he said, “that if you chose to kiss me at this moment, I would be absolutely powerless to prevent you.”

She regarded him from close range, then pressed her lips to his, allowed them to linger warmly for the space of three heartbeats. After which she opened the door and led him to the wardroom, where she skinned him at the sabacc table, leaving him with barely enough credits to buy a glass of juri juice.

Her father, Jaina thought, would have been proud.

Jag contemplated the ruin of his fortunes with a slight frown. “It seems I’ve paid heavily for that stolen kiss,” he said.

“Yes. But you’ve also paid in advance for others.”

Jag raised his scarred eyebrow. “That’s a good thing to know. When might I collect?”

“As soon as we can find a suitably private place.”

“Ah.” He seemed cheered. “Would it be precipitate to suggest that we go immediately?”

“Not at all.” She rose from the table. “Just one thing.”

He gained his feet and straightened his impossibly neat black uniform. “What’s that?”

“I think you’re right about my not doing all the work. I intend to delegate a fair share to you.”

Jag nodded. “Very good, Major.”

“I hope this will contribute to your development as an officer.”

“Oh.” He followed her out of the wardroom. “I’m sure that it will.”

Thrackan Sal-Solo looked out his office viewport at the squalid mess that was Peace City—half-completed construction covered with scaffolding,

muck-filled holes in the ground, slave barracks boiling with alien life—and he thought, *And all this is mine to command* . . .

If, of course, he could avoid being murdered by one of his loyal subjects. Which was the topic of the present discussion.

He turned to the black-haired woman who sat before his desk and contemplated the suitcase he'd opened on the desktop. The suitcase that contained a kilogram of glitterstim.

"You get one of these every week," he said.

She looked at him with cobalt-blue predator's eyes and flashed her prominent white teeth. "And how many people do I have to kill to earn it?"

"You don't have to kill anyone. What you have to do is keep *me* alive."

"Ah. A *challenge*." Dagga Marl steepled her fingertips and looked thoughtful. Then she shrugged. "All right. It'll be more interesting work than all the boring assassinations the Senate has been handing me."

"If I ask you to kill anyone," Thrackan said, "I'll pay you extra."

"Good to know," Dagga said as she closed the case and stowed it neatly under her chair.

He stepped from the viewport to his desk, then grimaced at the stitch in his left side. He massaged the painful area, feeling under his thumb the scar from Onimi's nasty little baton. Thrackan swore that if he ever caught up with Onimi, that malignant lop-headed little dwarf was going to lose a lot more than a kidney.

The first thing he'd done on Ylesia was be sworn in as President and Commander in Chief of the Peace Brigade.

The second thing he'd done on Ylesia was to meet with the chiefs of the Peace Brigade, an experience that left him undecided whether to laugh, cry, or run in screaming terror.

The Peace Brigade had originally owed its allegiance to something called the Alliance of Twelve. Maybe there had been twelve of them at one point, but there were around sixty of them now, and they called themselves a Senate. One horrified look had shown Thrackan what they were: thieves, renegades, criminals, slavers, murderers, and alien scum. The people who had betrayed their galaxy to the terror that was the Yuuzhan Vong—and it wasn't as if they'd done it out of conviction in the rightness of their cause. They made the Hutts who had built the original colony look like a congregation of saints.

The Hutts were dead: the Yuuzhan Vong had made a clean sweep of the whole caste, then installed the Peace Brigade in their place without altering any of the Hutts' other arrangements. The flayed skin of the Hutt chief was still on display in front of the Palace of Peace, where the Senate met, just in case anyone was tempted to grow nostalgic about the old order.

Most of the population of the planet were slaves, and most of these, oddly enough, were volunteers—religious ecstasies who worked themselves to death in the glitterstim factories in exchange for a daily blast of bliss directed at them by the Hutts' telepathic t'landa Til henchmen. The t'landa Til were still very much a part of the picture, having exchanged one overlordship for another.

Thrackan didn't like slavery—at least for humans—but he supposed there was no alternative under the circumstances. The Yuuzhan Vong wouldn't allow the use of droids, so *someone* had to dig the ditches, build the grand new buildings of Peace City's town center, and process the addictive glitterstim that made up the entirety of Ylesia's gross planetary product.

The son of Tiion Gama Sal had been raised on an estate, as a gentleman, with an army of droid servants. In the place of droids, he needed *someone* to see to his comforts.

Just as he needed someone to keep from him being murdered by the Senate and their cronies. They'd been madly conspiring and committing quiet violence against one another over control of the glitterstim operation, but now they'd united against their new President.

Thrackan decided that he needed to find the most cold-blooded, ruthless, efficient killer among them, and win that person to his side. And one look at Dagga Marl had convinced him that she was exactly what he was looking for.

She was completely mercenary and completely without morals, something Thrackan thought was to his advantage. She made her living as a bounty hunter and an assassin. She'd killed people for the Peace Brigade, and she'd killed Peace Brigade on behalf of other Peace Brigade. She seemed perfectly willing to kill Peace Brigade on behalf of Thrackan, and that was all he asked.

The most important thing about Dagga was that she was smart enough to know when she was well off. Others might offer her a large sum to kill Thrackan, but they weren't going to offer her a kilo of spice per week.

The spice was the only thing on Ylesia that passed for money. The Yuuzhan Vong intendants in charge of running his supposed economy hadn't even seen a *need* for money. Their chief economic principle was that those who obeyed orders and did their work without question would be rewarded with shelter and food. It hadn't occurred to them that a person might want a little *more* than organic glop to eat, a membranous cavern to live in, and an overgrown fungus to sit on. A person might prefer to live in marble halls enjoying a bath with golden fixtures, and the latest-model atmosphere craft.

Dagga looked up at him. "Is there anything you'd like me to do right now?"

Thrackan sat, fingers stroking the smooth polished surface of his desk. "Evaluate security here in my office, and in my residence. If you can't fix whatever's wrong, tell me and *I'll* fix it."

She flipped him a casual salute. "Right, Chief."

"And if you can recommend any reliable people to assist you . . ."

She tilted her head in thought. "I'll think about it. Reliability isn't one of the more common Peace Brigade virtues."

"Did I say Peace Brigade?"

Dagga seemed startled by the vehemence of Thrackan's words.

"I said *reliable*. I'll import someone if he's good enough. Though," he admitted, "I prefer them human."

A white smile flashed across Dagga's features. "I'll put together a little list," she said.

There was a knock on the door. Dagga made a slight adjustment to her clothing to enhance her homicidal capabilities, and Thrackan said, "Who is it?"

It was his chief of communications, an Etti named Mdimu. "Beg pardon, sir," he said, "but the advance party for the joint maneuvers has entered the system."

"When are they scheduled to arrive?" Thrackan asked.

"They'll be landing at the spaceport in approximately two hours."

"Very good. Send the quednak to the spaceport now, and I'll follow in my landspeeder at the appropriate time."

"Ah—" Mdimu hesitated. "Sir? Your Excellency?"

"Yes?"

"The Yuuzhan Vong—they don't like machinery, sir. If you arrive at the spaceport in a landspeeder they may consider it an insult."

Thrackan sighed, then explained slowly and simply so that even an alien like Mdimu could understand. "I'll arrive *before* the Vong and then send the landspeeder back to its docking bay. I will return with the Vong on the riding beasts. But I will *not* ride those stupid six-legged flatulent herbivorous lumbering ninnies to the spaceport *when I don't have to*. Understand?"

Mdimu hesitated, then nodded. "Yes, sir."

"And please tell the construction gangs to keep their machinery out of sight while the Vong are in town."

"Yes. Of course, Your Excellency."

Mdimu left the room. Dagga Marl and Thrackan exchanged looks.

"Of this I build a nation," he said.

The Yuuzhan Vong frigate analog, which looked like a large brownish green lump of vomit, arrived escorted by two squadrons of coralskippers, which looked like rather uninteresting rocks. Thrackan's official bodyguards—whom he would not have trusted to guard his body if it were the last on Ylesia, and who were most likely in the pay of various factions of the Senate anyway—shuffled into line and presented their amphistaffs.

Amphistaffs. One of the Yuuzhan Vong's most annoying and dangerous exports. Thrackan gave his official bodyguards a wide berth, as experience had shown they weren't very good at controlling the weapon their Yuuzhan Vong sponsors had so graciously given them. The previous week he'd lost two guards, bitten during practice by their own weapons' poisonous heads.

Followed by his *real* bodyguard, Dagga Marl, Thrackan marched to the frigate analog and waited. Eventually a part of the hull withdrew somehow, and an object like a giant, wart-encrusted tongue flopped down to touch the landing field. Down this ramp came a double file of Yuuzhan Vong armored warriors with amphistaffs—which *these* warriors looked as if they knew how to use. Once formed on the pavement, they were followed by Supreme Commander Maal Lah, architect of the Yuuzhan Vong capture of Coruscant.

Maal Lah's appearance was presentable, for a Yuuzhan Vong. Unlike Nom Anor, with his brand-new plaeryin bol implant—this eye replacement

even larger and nastier than the one he had lost—or Shimrra, who was so scarred and mutilated that his face looked as if it had gone through a threshing machine, Maal Lah's regular features were still recognizable as features. He'd restrained the impulse to carve himself up in honor of his vicious gods, and for the most part settled for red and blue tattoos. Thrackan could actually look at him without wanting to lose his lunch. If he let his eyes go slightly out of focus, the tattoos formed an abstract pattern that was almost pleasing.

He made a note to try to keep his eyes slightly out of focus for the rest of the day.

"Greetings, Commander," he said. "Welcome to Ylesia."

Maal Lah had fortunately brought a translator along, a member of the intendant caste who had cut off an ear and replaced it with a glistening, semitranslucent sluglike creature the function of which Thrackan preferred not to contemplate.

"Salutations, President Sal-Solo," Maal Lah said through his translator. "I come to remind you of your submission and to bring your fleet to its obedience."

"Er—quite," Thrackan said. *A fine way with diplomacy these Vong have.* "The intendants on Ylesia have . . . grown . . . your damutek. Would you care to see it?"

"First I will inspect your guard."

Thrackan stayed on the far side of Maal Lah as the warrior inspected the Presidential Guard, hoping that if Maal Lah were accidentally sprayed with poison, Thrackan himself might have a running head start before Yuuzhan Vong warriors began to massacre everyone present. Fortunately no fatalities occurred.

"A shabby lot of useless wretches, totally without spirit or discipline," Maal Lah commented as he walked with Thrackan to the riding beasts.

"I agree, Commander," Thrackan said.

"Discipline and order should be beaten into them. What I wouldn't give to see them in the hands of the great Czulkang Lah."

Now that *might be fun*, Thrackan thought, though without knowing who or what Czulkang Lah might be. Thrackan always enjoyed a good thrashing, provided he wasn't the one on the receiving end.

"I'll dismiss their commander," he said. Their commander was a Duros, and therefore expendable. He'd replace the Duros with a human, provided he could find one who might conceivably be loyal.

"I trust the Peace Brigade fleet is ready?" Maal Lah said.

"Admiral Capo assures me that they are fully trained and alert, and eager to serve alongside their gallant allies, the Yuuzhan Vong." Actually Thrackan had no great hope for the motley force that was the Peace Brigade fleet. In fact he rather hoped that Maal Lah would be so disgusted as to execute the Rodian Admiral Capo, thus providing another vacancy Thrackan could fill with a human.

Again, if he could find one to trust. Here that always seemed to be the problem.

Reflecting that he was a little old for this sort of thing, Thrackan followed Maal Lah up the vine ladder to the purple-green resinous tower atop the six-legged form of a Yuuzhan Vong riding beast. The quednak's moss-covered scales reeked of something that needed flushing down the nearest sewer. At the urging of its intendant handler, the beast lurched to its feet and set off for Peace City at a slow walk. Thrackan hoped the motion wouldn't make him ill.

A pair of swoop analogs—open-cockpit fliers with a crew of two and sped along by dovin basals—rose to take position on either side of the riding beast. Maal Lah wasn't trusting his life entirely to guards who moved on foot.

Thrackan cast a glance at the double file of Yuuzhan Vong warriors trotting along in the big reptoid's wake. By the time they traveled the twenty-two kilometers to Peace City, perhaps even the fabled Yuuzhan Vong would be tired of the pace.

"Now that we have more of your people on the planet," Thrackan ventured, "I wonder if we might better provide for their spiritual needs."

Maal Lah's answer was dry. "How would you do that, Excellency?"

"There are no temples to your gods here. Perhaps we could provide one for your people."

"That is a generous thought, Excellency. Of course, it is *we* who would have to provide the template for the structure, and, of course, the priest."

"We could donate the ground, at least."

"So you could." Maal Lah considered for a moment. "As with many of my clan, I have always been a devotee of Yun-Yammka, the Slayer. It would

be an act of devotion to foster his worship on a new world. Of course, the worship requires sacrifice . . .”

“Plenty of slaves for that purpose,” Thrackan said, as heartily as he could manage.

Maal Lah bowed his head. “Very good. So long as you are willing to donate one from time to time.”

Thrackan waved a hand dismissively. “Anything we can do for our brothers.” At least he could make sure none of the victims were human. “I have a piece of land already in mind,” he added.

He certainly did. The land in question was adjacent to the Altar of Promises, where the t’landa Til administered to the slaves their daily dose of telepathic euphoria. The t’landa Til were said to have powers over all humanoid species, and Thrackan was inclined to wonder if that included the Yuuzhan Vong.

The sight of the Yuuzhan Vong rolling about in ecstatic bliss would certainly be a pleasing one. The sight would be even more pleasing if he could get the mighty warriors *addicted* to their daily blast of cosmic communion, as were the slaves.

It seemed worth sacrificing a few aliens to have a whole regiment of Yuuzhan Vong addicts willing to do anything Thrackan suggested in return for a daily ecstatic thunderbolt from their god.

Thrackan chuckled to himself. And Shimrra thought *he* was an expert on the taking of vengeance.

So agreeable did Thrackan find this vision that he almost missed Maal Lah’s next statement.

“You should prepare yourself and the Senate for a special visitor in the next few days.”

It took Thrackan a few seconds to realize the import of this. All his pleasing fantasies vanished like vapor before the wind.

“Shimrra’s coming *here*?” he gasped.

Maal Lah snarled at him. “The *Supreme Overlord*,” he corrected savagely, “will remain in his new capital until the gods tell him otherwise. No, it’s *another* who will soon be paying you an official visit. With this one you will sign a treaty of peace, mutual aid, and nonaggression.” A smile snarled its way across the warrior’s face. “Prepare yourself to meet the Chief of State of the New Republic.”

The streaming stars flashed and nailed themselves to the heavens, and the Ylesia system leapt into life on Jacen's displays. Alarms beeped at the realization that the ships in orbit around the planet were enemy. Jacen closed up on Jaina, the formation leader, his X-wing tucked in neatly behind his sister's fighter.

"Twin Suns Squadron, check in!" Jaina's voice on the comm.

"Twin Two," said Jaina's Neimoidian wingmate, Vale, "in realspace with all systems normative."

"Twin Three," another pilot said. "In realspace. All systems normative."

The pilots all checked in, all the way to Jacen, who had been added to Jaina's flight as Twin Thirteen. He made his report, the Force filling his mind, and through it he felt the Jedi: fierce, loyal Lowbacca and the exhilarated Tesar near at hand; Corran Horn distracted by his own pilots' checklist; the cold-blooded exhilaration of Saba Sebatyne and her Wild Knights. And, more distantly, with other elements of the fleet, the concentration of Tahiri, the melancholy determination of Alema Rar, the confidence of Zekk, and the sheer *power* of Kyp Durrone, a power very much akin to rage.

And, most clearly of all, Jacen felt the presence of Jaina, her mind ablaze with machinelike calculation.

The Jedi meld filled Jacen's mind, a psychic feedback mechanism between himself and the other Jedi. He was impressed by the meld's power, and by how it had grown since he'd last experienced it on Myrkr. There, it had been a mixed blessing, but then the Jedi war party at Myrkr had been divided among themselves. Here, they were united in a single purpose.

Jacen's sensitivity to the Force had grown within the meld, and he was aware of the other lives around him, the non-Jedi pilots of Twin Suns Squadron, and others nearby, particularly the disciplined minds of Jagged Fel's Chiss squadron, which flew to port and slightly behind them. Jag had volunteered his squadron for this fight, even though they weren't technically a part of Kre'fey's command. Once Kre'fey had been reminded that Jag's veterans had originally been a part of Twin Suns Squadron before being split off, he'd accepted Jag's offer.

"Listen up, people." Jaina's voice came again on the comm. "I know we outnumber the enemy, but that doesn't make the ordnance they'll shoot at us any less real. This isn't a drill, and you can get killed if you're not careful. I want everyone to stick with their wingmate and keep an eye open for an

enemy maneuvering to get behind you. Streak,” she said to Lowbacca, “I want your flight to our right, a couple of clicks behind. Tesar, you’re flying above and behind.”

Above was a meaningless term in space, but it was easier than saying “ninety degrees from my and Lowbacca’s axis,” and Tesar knew what she meant, anyway.

“Copy,” Tesar said, and Lowbacca gave an answering roar.

“Remember that Jag Fel’s to our left. Understood?”

There was a chorus of acknowledgments.

“Right then,” Jaina said. “Let’s teach these traitors a thing or two.”

Jacen was impressed. He hadn’t realized Jaina had become such an effective leader. Her performance was even more impressive because, through the Jedi meld, he could also sense her scanning her displays while she was talking, minding her comm channels, and worrying about her inexperienced pilots while trying to work out tactics that would keep them from killing themselves.

Jacen kept his fighter tucked into formation behind Jaina’s, an extra wingmate for Twin Leader. His eyes scanned the displays and saw that Kre’fey’s entire armada had by now entered realspace, three task forces grouped as close to Ylesia as the planet’s mass shadow would permit. Each of the three groups was the equal of the entire Peace Brigade fleet, and they had the enemy force trapped between them. The only hope for the enemy commander was to leave orbit instantly and attack one of Kre’fey’s task forces, hoping to smash through it before the others arrived to overwhelm him.

Moments ticked by, and the enemy commander made no move. His only real hope was slipping through his fingers.

And then the enemy fleet moved, choosing as its target Twin Suns Squadron, and the task force behind it.

The Chief of State of the New Republic was in the middle of his address to the Ylesian Senate when one of Thrackan’s aides—the human one, fortunately—came scuttling down the aisle of the Senate building and began to whisper in Thrackan’s ear. Maal Lah, who was watching the speech from another seat nearby, suddenly became very preoccupied with talking into one of the villips he wore on the shoulders of his armor.

Thrackan listened to the aide's agitated whisper, then nodded and rose. "I regret the necessity of interrupting," he began, and saw the Senate's malevolent gaze immediately turn in his direction. "A fleet from the New Republic has appeared in Ylesian space." He watched the august Senatorial heads turn to one another in growing panic as a buzzing filled the hall. Thrackan turned to the Chief of State of the New Republic.

"You didn't tell anyone you were coming, did you?" he asked.

If it weren't a dire emergency in which he might be killed, Thrackan might almost enjoy this.

"These are rebels!" the New Republic Chief of State proclaimed. "Rebels against rightful authority! They wouldn't dare fire on their leader!"

"Perhaps," Thrackan suggested, "you'd care to get on the comm and order them to stop."

The Chief of State hesitated, then came down from the podium. "This is the sort of misunderstanding that can only be cleared up later. Perhaps we should, umm, seek shelter first."

"An excellent idea," Thrackan said, and turned again to the Senate. "I suggest that the honorable members proceed to the shelter." As a few bolted at top speed for the exit, he added, "*In an orderly manner!*"—as if it would do any good. His words only seemed to accelerate their flight, desks overturning as the founders of the noble Ylesian Republic jammed shoulder to shoulder in the doors.

Thrackan turned to Maal Lah and suppressed a shrug. These people hadn't betrayed their own galaxy out of an excess of courage, and he couldn't say he was surprised by their behavior.

The Yuuzhan Vong commander was barking into his little shoulder villip. His translator sidled up to Thrackan.

"Commander Lah is ordering the forces that were already in transit for the joint maneuvers to come at once."

"Very good. Will the commander be going to his command ship?"

"The distance to the spaceport is too great."

Especially if you're traveling at the pace of a fat ugly Hutt-sized reptoid, Thrackan thought.

"I can offer the commander room in our shelter," Thrackan said.

"The commander has no need of the shelter," the translator said. "He will instead take charge of the troops here in the capital."

"Excellent! I'm sure we're in good hands."

Maal Lah finished his one-sided conversation and stalked toward Thrackan, his fingers curled around his baton of rank. "I will need to take command of your Presidential Guard and your paramilitaries."

"Of course," Thrackan said. "Be my guest." He feigned thought, and added, "It's a pity the Yuuzhan Vong gods are so opposed to technology. If they weren't, we'd have installed planetary shields and be perfectly safe."

Maal Lah gave him a murderous glare, and for a moment Thrackan's kidney tingled at the thought that he'd gone too far.

"Will you lead your forces into battle, Excellency?" Lah demanded. "Or will you seek shelter with the others?"

Thrackan raised his hands. "I regret that I have no warrior training, Commander. I'll leave all that to the professionals." He turned to Dagga, who had been waiting politely behind him all this time. "Come, Marl."

He left the room at a rapid but dignified pace, Dagga falling into step by his side and half a pace back. "Will you be going to the shelter, sir?" she asked.

Thrackan gave her a sidelong smile. "I know better than to hide in a hole with no back door," he said.

Her cold grin answered his own. "Very good, sir," she said.

"I'm going to the docking bay in back of the Presidential palace and take my landspeeder on the fastest route out of town."

Dagga's smile broadened. "Yes, sir."

"Can you drive fast, Marl?"

She nodded. "I can, sir. Very fast."

"Why don't you drive, then? While I make use of the razor I've stored in the backseat, and change into the fresh clothes I stored there."

"Shadow bomb away." Jaina's voice came over Jacen's headphones. "Altering course, thirty degrees."

"Copy that, Twin Leader," Jacen said.

Jacen remained tucked in behind Jaina's X-wing as the fighter lifted out of the way of the enemy fleet, which was set to come rampaging through this part of space in about ten seconds, and he used the Force to help Jaina push the shadow bomb on ahead, toward its target, a *Republic*-class cruiser that was spearheading the Peace Brigade escape attempt.

"Enemy fighters ahead. Accelerating . . ."

Jacen had already felt the enemy pilots in the Force. He opened fire at where he knew they would be, and was rewarded with a flash that meant an enemy pilot hadn't powered his or her shields in time. Jacen shifted to another target and fired, another deflection shot, but the bolts slammed into shields and flashed away. The target formation burst apart like a firework, each two-fighter element weaving away from Twin Suns' attack.

At that moment Jaina's shadow bomb hit the enemy cruiser, and its bow blossomed in a blaze of fire.

Jacen was following Jaina after the corkscrewing enemy fighters—E-wings—and the Jedi meld rose in his perceptions. He felt Corran Horn making a slashing run at an enemy frigate, the Wild Knights methodically destroying a flight of B-wings, but the knowledge wasn't intrusive—it didn't demand attention, or take away from his piloting, it was just *there*, in the back of his mind.

"Stay close, Vale," Jacen told Jaina's wandering wingmate.

"Oh! Sorry!"

"No chatter on this channel," Jaina admonished. "I'm breaking right . . . *now*."

Vale wandered even farther from her assigned position during this maneuver, and through the Force Jacen sensed the intense concentration of an E-wing pilot trying to get her into his sights. Jacen deliberately wove out of his assigned place in an S-curve, and as he did so he was aware through the Force-meld that Jaina knew exactly what he was doing, and why.

"Turning left thirty degrees," Jaina said, which swung her fighter and Vale's into what the enemy pilot certainly thought was a perfect setup . . .

Except that it led the enemy right into Jacen's sights. He touched off a full quad burst of laserfire and saw the E-wing's shields collapse under the concentrated barrage. Jacen fired again, and the E-wing disintegrated.

Jacen's heart gave a leap as the E-wing's wingmate chanced a deflection shot and scored a triple laser burst on Jacen's shields—which held—and then Jacen wove away, the E-wing in pursuit, until Jaina's own fighter swirled through a graceful, unhurried series of arcs, and she and Vale blew the Brigader and his craft to atoms. As she overtook Jacen he could see Jaina's grim satisfaction through the cockpit, and she waggled her wings at him as he slid once more into position.

Then he sensed her mood shift, and he knew she was receiving orders on the command channel.

“Twin Suns,” she said. “Regroup. Re-form on me. We’re going to cover the landing party.”

Jacen knew she was reluctant to leave the combat once it had begun, but he also knew that the fight was going well for the New Republic. The forces were evenly matched in numbers, but the Peace Brigade personnel simply weren’t up to the mark. Some mercenary pilots in starfighters were giving a good account of themselves, but the capital ships weren’t fighting very well, and some of them were shedding escape pods even though they hadn’t taken critical damage. A pair of enemy starfighter squadrons was fleeing the battle as fast as they could, with A-wings in pursuit. Kre’fey’s two additional task forces would soon be on the scene, decisively tilting the odds even farther toward the New Republic, and at that point Jacen wouldn’t be surprised to see some of the Peace Brigade ships surrender.

It was good to feel the enemy in the Force again, Jacen thought. The Yuuzhan Vong were an emptiness in the Force, a black hole into which the light of the Force disappeared. These Peace Brigaders at least registered as a part of the living universe, and because he could feel them in the Force, Jacen could anticipate their actions. Compared to the Yuuzhan Vong, these people were easy.

Easy to destroy. He tasted a whiff of sadness at the necessity—these targets shouldn’t *be* targets; they should be fighting on behalf of the galaxy against the invaders. Instead they had chosen to betray their own, and Kyp Durrone and Traest Kre’fey were determined they pay the penalty.

Twin Suns Squadron re-formed, and Jag Fel’s Chiss squadron fell into place on their flank. The blue-and-white sphere of Ylesia grew closer. Jacen saw the landing force separating itself from the closest of Kre’fey’s task forces.

“We’re going to take out the spaceport,” Jaina said. *And also to draw fire*, Jacen knew, so they could learn where the defenses were and knock them out before the ground forces, in their lightly armored landing craft, attempted their assault.

“Configure your foils for atmosphere,” Jaina said.

The X-wings took on an I-shape as the foils drew together to become wings. The blue planet rolled beneath them . . . and then they saw a patch of green, one of the small continents coming up, and Jaina tipped her fighter toward it, with Jacen and the others after.

Jacen's craft rocked to the buffets of the atmosphere. Flame licked at his forward shields. If he looked over his shoulder he could see sonic shock waves rolling over his foils like spiderwebs. The green land drew closer.

Then new symbols flashed onto his displays, and his own voice echoed Jaina's cry. "*Skips!* Coralskippers, dead ahead!"

The enemy fighters were rising from the spaceport, two squadrons' worth, their dovin basals yanking them clear of the planet's gravity. And in their wake came a much larger target, a frigate analog. The Yuuzhan Vong were clearly aiming for the landing force, which was swinging above the planet in high orbit, guarded by a pair of frigates and the Screammers, a rookie squadron of X-wings under a twenty-three-year-old captain. The escort could probably handle the attackers—eventually—but in the meantime the Yuuzhan Vong could cut up the landing force badly.

"Accelerating! Maximum thrust!" Jaina called, and Twin Suns poured power to their engines. They were in a good position to bounce the enemy as the Yuuzhan Vong clawed their way up through the atmosphere. Jacen looked at his displays and calculated angles, trajectories . . .

"I've got a shadow bomb, Twin Leader," he said. "Let me take a run at the frigate."

Through the Jedi meld he felt Jaina duplicating his own calculation. "Twin Thirteen," she decided, "take your shot."

Jacen dipped his nose and aimed for the patch of air he thought the frigate would pass through in another twenty standard seconds or so. The moment of release was difficult to judge—he couldn't find the frigate analog in the Force, and Jacen would have to make a guess based on how it appeared on his displays.

Suddenly he felt the power of the Force swell in his body, as if he'd just filled his lungs with pure universal power. Calculations stormed through his mind, faster than he'd thought possible. And distantly, he found he *could* detect the enemy ship—not as a presence in the Force, but as an absence, a cold emptiness in the universe of life.

There were Jedi nearby that hadn't yet engaged the enemy—Tahiri, Kyp Durrón, Zekk, and Alema Rar. Since they hadn't been distracted by combat, they had just *loaned* him their power through the Jedi meld, sending him strength and aiding his calculation.

He felt the cold metal of the bomb-release mechanism in his fist, and he pulled it. “Shadow bomb away.” And then, as he pulled back the stick and fed power to the engines, he fired a pair of concussion missiles.

The shadow bomb was a missile without propellant, packed instead from head to tail with explosive, and would either drift toward its target or be pushed with a little help from the Force. The lack of a propellant flare made the bomb hard for the Yuuzhan Vong to detect, and the extra explosive gave it tremendous punch when it hit.

The two concussion missiles were intended as a distraction for the Yuuzhan Vong—if the enemy were paying attention to the two missiles, coming in on a different trajectory, then they’d be less likely to see the shadow bomb dropping toward them.

Thanks, Jacen sent into the meld. And then he felt the others fade from his perceptions as first Kyp, then the others, entered combat.

The three parts of Kre’fey’s fleet had just united, Jacen thought, with the Peace Brigade forces trapped between them. The Brigaders were about to lose their whole fleet.

The nose of Jacen’s X-wing pointed higher, toward the distant glowing exhaust ports of Jaina’s squadron. This put the frigate below in a perfect position to shoot at him, the fire heading practically up his tail. He saw the plasma cannon projectiles and missiles coming, and he jinked wildly for a few seconds, until his shadow bomb hit the Yuuzhan Vong ship and blew its nose off. Along with the nose went the dovin basals that were being used for defense, so even the two concussion missiles slammed home.

What doomed the Yuuzhan Vong frigate wasn’t the damage, but the aerodynamics. If the frigate had been in the vacuum of space it probably would have survived, but its fate was sealed by Ylesia’s atmosphere. The frigate began to weave through the air like an out-of-control skyrocket as the wind seized hold of its torn bow section. Parts tore off and flew away, spinning downward; and then the frigate lost control completely and began a death spiral toward the planet below.

Jacen’s attention was already on the combat above him. Jaina and Jag Fel had bounced the coralskippers and had killed at least three of them, their wrecked hulls plunging downward in the atmosphere with tails of flame, but now the battle had become a melee. Again aerodynamics worked to the advantage of the New Republic: a coralskipper had all the aerodynamics of a brick, but the X-wings, with their foils closed, made decent, maneuverable

atmosphere craft. Still, Jacen sensed Jaina's tension through the Jedi meld: half Twin Suns Squadron were still rookies, easy meat for an experienced enemy; and the Yuuzhan Vong were flying like veterans.

An X-wing trailing fire plunged past Jacen as he climbed, and he saw a flash as the pilot ejected. Fragments of burning yorik coral crashed onto Jacen's shields as he climbed: that meant another coralskipper accounted for.

He would be at too much of a disadvantage if he climbed straight into the fight, so he avoided the battle and got above the furball before rolling his craft into a dive. He felt control surfaces biting air as the X-wing accelerated, and found a target ahead, a coralskipper maneuvering onto the tail of an X-wing that seemed to be wandering around randomly, like a dewback looking for its herd—doubtless one of Jaina's rookies. Jacen chanced the deflection shot, quadded his lasers, and opened fire, and only when he saw the coralskipper explode behind him did the rookie panic, flinging his fighter all over the sky to avoid a menace that Jacen had already destroyed.

Jacen flew on, saw a coralskipper being chased by a Chiss clawcraft, the Yuuzhan Vong's dovin basal snatching the pursuer's bolts from the air as he flew. It was another chancy deflection shot, but Jacen carefully pulled the fighter after the enemy, a smooth curve . . . then found that he was falling short, the enemy dancing just ahead of his shots. Frustration sang in his nerves, and he was on the verge of ordering his astromech to check his controls when he realized it was all the fault of the air—the atmosphere had slowed the fighter too much. He triggered a concussion missile then, and was rewarded by seeing it slam home on the Yuuzhan Vong's flank. The tough coralskipper kept on flying, but its dovin basal was distracted and the Chiss pilot's next shot flamed it.

Jacen's heart leapt as he realized he was in danger, and he jerked his stick to the right as shots flared past his canopy. He'd spent too long lining up his last target and an enemy had jumped him. He corkscrewed through the sprawl of swirling fighter craft and managed to lose his pursuer, and when he stopped his dodging there was an enemy right in front of him, flying right into his sights while lining up on a clawcraft. Jacen blew him apart with a quad laser burst.

He was through the furball now, and pulled back the stick to climb and repeat his maneuver. The others had slowed down to maneuver, and were

easy targets for anyone diving in from above. He doubted that he could manage three hits on every pass, but there was no reason not to try.

Jacen made a lazy loop while he scanned the fight through his cockpit, then he half rolled upright and fed power to the engines. A sudden cry came over the comm. "I've just lost rear shields! *Anyone!* This is Twin Two—I've just lost an engine! *Help!*"

Twin Two was Vale, Jaina's rookie wingmate—probably lost, and without cover. He felt Jaina's rising tension through the Force-meld as she searched for Twin Two, and he scanned the mass of weaving fighters as he approached, seeing one madly dancing X-wing with a tail of flame, a pair of skips weaving after her.

"Break left, Twin Two," he called. "I've got you."

"Breaking left!" Panic and relief warred in Vale's reply.

Jacen hit the atmosphere brakes and the X-wing slowed as if it had hit a lake of mercury, and then he crabbed his jouncing fighter around into a shot on the lead coralskipper. His laser bolts blew the canopy away and sent the craft in an end-over-end spin for the planet below. The second enemy dodged his lasers, and Jacen yanked his fighter into an even tighter turn, the atmosphere jolting the craft, dropping its speed. The enemy swallowed his concussion missile into the singularity of its dovin basal and caught the laser bolts as well, but Jacen saw Vale dart away into safety while her pursuer was preoccupied. And then enemy rounds were hammering on Jacen's shields, and he released the atmosphere brakes and tried to roll away, punching the throttle.

He'd slowed down too much, losing speed and maneuverability and choice. An enemy had found him and was hovering off his tail, hurling round after round after him while he tried desperately to regain speed and the ability to maneuver . . .

Jacen's astromech droid chittered as the aft shields died. And then there was a crash that Jacen felt through his spine, and the stick kicked against his gloved hand. The X-wing slewed abruptly to the left. It slowed so much that the pursuing coralskipper overshot, passing within meters of Jacen's canopy, and his head swiveled on his neck as he looked frantically in all directions, trying to spot any additional threats . . .

And there it was. On the end of Jacen's left foils, its claws dug into the paired laser cannons, was a grutchin, one of the winged, insectoid, metal-eating creatures that the Yuuzhan Vong sometimes released with their

missiles. A grutchin whose malevolent black-eyed gaze stared back at Jacen, before it turned to its work and took a leisurely chomp out of the upper left foil.

Jacen dived to gain speed, working the controls frantically to keep the X-wing balanced as the weight and drag of the grutchin threatened to destabilize it. As speed built he was rewarded by the grutchin digging its claws more firmly into the foil, hunching against the battering it was receiving from the atmosphere. Jacen felt his lips draw back in a harsh smile. He'd hoped the wind would strip the grutchin away, but this was the next best thing: the creature couldn't eat his ship as long as it was spending all its strength just to hang on.

Then Jacen pulled back on the stick and fed power to the engines. The only way to get rid of the grutchin was to open the canopy and shoot the thing off his wing, but he couldn't open the canopy and stand up as long as he was in Ylesia's atmosphere—the wind would tear him right out of the craft and send him tumbling toward the planet below with half the bones in his body broken.

An interesting dilemma, he thought. The grutchin couldn't eat his craft as long as Jacen was flying at speed through the atmosphere, but he couldn't get rid of the grutchin until he got out of the atmosphere altogether. This would call for fine judgment.

"This is Twin Thirteen," he said into the comm. "I've got a grutchin on my wing. I'll be back after I deal with it."

"Copy," came Jaina's voice. He could hear the strain of combat in the terse expression, and feel her stress in the Force.

Jacen kept his eyes on the grutchin and his throttles all the way forward. He kept the nose tipped as far as he could without losing speed, and slowly the buffeting of the atmosphere eased as the air thinned. When the grutchin was able to lift its head and take another bite of the upper port laser cannon, Jacen stood the X-wing on its tail and fled straight up into space. The grutchin shifted its grip and took another bite, and the laser cannon tore free and spun away into the darkening sky. Jacen reached for his blaster and loosened it in its holster. The whisper of wind on the canopy was almost gone. The second laser tumbled into the sky, and the grutchin turned, its claws clamped firmly on metal, and walked methodically along the two united foils, heading for the engine.

Jacen extended the foils into the X-position, hoping to shake it free or slow it down, but without success. Instead he felt, rather than heard, a crash as the grutchin's head drove like a metal punch into his engine cowl.

Better do *something*, he thought. He threw the cockpit latch; as the cockpit depressurized, force fields snapped into place around him, preserving his air. The sound of flight vanished, though he could still feel the vibration of his craft sounding up his spine. Red lights were flashing on his engine displays. He nudged the controls to the cockpit servos, lifting it slightly open. When he felt no turbulence he opened the cockpit all the way.

He summoned the Force to guide the fighter's controls as he stood in the cockpit and pulled his blaster from its holster. As he leaned out of the cockpit he saw the upper left foil fly away spinning, eaten away at the root. There was a flash of fire in the engine and it died.

Surely, he thought, the flameout was enough to cook the grutchin. He leaned farther out, bracing one arm on the cockpit coaming, and thrust out the blaster.

The grutchin's beady eyes stared back at him with malevolent purpose. And then the creature's wings extended, and Jacen's heart gave a lurch as he realized the grutchin was going to leap straight for his face.

He fired while mentally rehearsing the move necessary to snatch his lightsaber with his free hand in case the blaster didn't do the job. He fired again, and again. The grutchin reared, its clawed forelegs pawing the airless space between them, and Jacen fired twice more.

The grutchin's head tumbled away into the emptiness. The rest of the grutchin then followed.

Blasters work, Jacen reminded himself as he eased back into the cockpit and sealed the canopy.

His astromech droid had already prepared a damage report. Rear shields down, both port lasers gone along with the port upper S-foil; the other port foil damaged, and one engine destroyed.

Jacen thumped a frustrated fist on the cockpit coaming. The X-wing's aerodynamics had been wrecked—if he went into the atmosphere to aid Jaina now, his craft would go into a spin that would end only when he hit the ground.

He had come here to aid Jaina, to make certain that she would never be without his support. Now he was leaving her in a desperate fight with the enemy.

But once he had time to listen on Twin Suns' comm channel, it appeared that Jaina no longer needed his aid. She was ordering her squadron to regroup.

"Twin Leader, this is Twin Thirteen," he said. "The grutchin's dealt with."

Jaina was all business. "Twin Thirteen, what's your status?"

"I'm going to need to get a new fighter before I can rejoin. What's *your* condition?"

"The fight's over. Kyp and Saba came to help us. We're regrouping to hit the spaceport and cover the landing."

"And the Brigaders' fleet?"

"Surrendered. That's how Kyp and Saba were free to join us." There was a pause. "Twin Thirteen, Twin Two has lost an engine. I need you to escort her to rejoin the fleet."

"Understood," Jacen said, "though considering the state of my fighter, Vale may end up escorting *me*."

He heard snickers over the comm. Through the meld Jacen felt his sister bearing the humor with patience.

"Just get her there, Twin Thirteen," she said finally.

"Understood," Jacen said, and rolled his fighter so that he could spot Vale approaching from the planet below.

"Inertial compensators," Thrackan said as he contemplated the wreck of his landspeeder. "What a *good* idea."

It had taken Thrackan and Dagga Marl longer to escape Peace City than he'd expected, largely because so many others were fleeing on foot and had gotten in the way. Barely had they emerged from Peace City's ramshackle limits than a colossal spiraling chunk of yorik coral had come tumbling down out of the sky like a grayish green lump and impacted on the road just ahead of them.

The explosion had thrown the landspeeder off the road and spinning into a patch of trees, where, between tree trunks and flying chunks of yorik coral, it had been comprehensively destroyed. But the deluxe landspeeder—built originally for a young Hutt, to judge by the fittings—had been equipped with inertial compensators, and these had failed only after the vehicle had

come to a complete halt. Thrackan and Dagga emerged from the wreck unscathed.

Thrackan turned to look at the shattered Yuuzhan Vong frigate lying in fragments beneath a thick cloud of smoke and dust.

"I don't think Maal Lah's forces are doing very well," Thrackan said. There was a horrific smell of burning organics, and he remembered that the frigate had actually been alive, that something akin to blood had pulsed through its hull.

He turned to Dagga. "You wouldn't have private means of getting us off the planet, do you?"

"No, I don't."

"Or knowledge of a landspeeder anywhere nearby?"

Dagga shook her head. Thrackan shrugged.

"That's all right. One will come along in a minute, stop to work out how to get around the wreckage—and then we'll steal it."

Dagga flashed him her shark's grin. "Boss, I like the way you think."

They crouched for some time in the trees by the road, but no landspeeder came. The explosion, with its cloud of smoke, had discouraged anyone from fleeing in this direction.

Thrackan shrugged. "I guess we walk."

"Where are we walking *to*?"

"Away from the city that's about to be pounded into gravel." Thrackan began picking his way through the debris field. There was relatively little left to burn—most of the frigate had been *rock*—and the smoke was dissipating.

He and Dagga fled back into the cover of the trees as a flight of fighter craft howled out of the sky and shrieked along the road toward Peace City. The fighters were distinctive, with ball cockpits and weird jagged pylons on either side. Thrackan was annoyed.

"TIE fighters? We're being attacked by the *Empire* now?" He glared. "I call this excessive!" He shook his finger at the sky. "I call this overkill on the part of Fate!"

He waited a few minutes, then rose from his crouch among the bushes and scanned the sky carefully. "I guess they're gone. But let's stay in the trees and—"

Dagga cocked an ear to the sky. "Listen, boss."

Thrackan listened, then ducked into the bushes again. "This is outrageous," he muttered. "Haven't these people anything better to do?"

Another squadron of fighters—X-wings this time—blasted along the road, their wakes sending the last of the debris smoke swirling out to the sides in huge corkscrew whirls. Then out of the smoke came a phalanx of whining white landing craft that settled onto the huge scar created by the falling frigate. The last wisps of smoke were flattened by the repulsorlift fields as the landers neared the ground, and then the great forward hatches swung open and whole companies of armored soldiers floated out on military landspeeders that bristled with armament.

"Right," Thrackan said as he and Dagga tried to dig themselves into the turf. "We wait till they've gone on to the city, and then we steal one of the transports and head for home."

Dagga gave him a look. "Home had better be pretty close. Those transports won't have hyperspace capability."

Thrackan ground his teeth. This was *not* working out.

The soldiers briskly secured a perimeter, and more craft whined to a landing. It looked as if the soldiers had landed in at least regimental strength.

"I think we're in trouble," Dagga said.

The soldiers' perimeter had expanded as new craft landed, and troopers were now quite close. An officer with a scanner had spotted the two life-forms in the trees, and at his command a pair of landspeeders swung toward the wooded area where Thrackan and Dagga were hiding.

"Right," Thrackan said. "We give ourselves up. First chance you get, you break me out and we steal a ship and head for freedom."

"I'm with you there," Dagga said, "right up to the point where I take *you* with me. I don't think you're going to have access to a weekly kilo of spice after this."

"I've got more than spice," Thrackan said. "Get me to Corellia, and you'll find I'm stinking rich and willing to share—"

His words were interrupted by an officer's amplified order.

"The two of you in the woods. Come out slowly, and with your hands up."

Thrackan saw Dagga's cold eyes harden as she calculated her chances, and his nerves leapt at the thought of being caught in a crossfire. He decided he'd better make up her mind for her. "Darling!" he shouted. "We're saved!"

And then, as he scrambled to his feet, he whispered, "Leave your weapons here."

He pasted a silly grin to his face and came out of the trees, his hands held high. "You're from the New Republic, right? Bless you for coming!" The officer approached and scanned him for weapons. "We saw those TIE fighters and we thought maybe the Emperor was back. Again. That's why we were hiding."

"Your name, sir?"

"Fazum," Thrackan said promptly. "Ludus Fazum. We were part of a refugee convoy from Falleen, got captured by the Peace Brigade and enslaved." He turned to Dagga, who was walking carefully out of the trees with her hands raised. "This is my fiancée Dagga, ah—" He coughed, realizing Dagga might have a warrant out for her. "—Farglblog." He gave her a grin. "Whaddya think, darling?" he asked. "We're rescued!"

She managed a smile. "You bet!" she said. "This is great!"

Dagga was scanned and came up clean. The officer gave them a searching look from under the brim of his helmet. "You look pretty well fed for slaves," he said.

"We were house slaves!" Thrackan said. "We just did, ah . . ." His invention failed him. "House things."

The officer turned to look over his shoulder. "Corporal!"

Thrackan and Dagga were marched to an open area under the guard of the corporal. The area, gouged dirt scattered with hot, crumbling yorik coral, had been reserved for captured civilians, but Dagga and Thrackan were, for the moment, its only two occupants.

"*Farglblog?*" she grated.

"Sorry."

"How do you *spell* it?"

Thrackan shrugged. He looked at the troopers in their white armor, ready for an advance on Peace City, and wondered what they were waiting for.

The answer came in the form of a pair of X-wings that hovered to a stop right over their heads, not knowing the large open space had been reserved for civilians. Thrackan and Dagga were forced to move to one side as the two craft settled onto their repulsorlifts. Thrackan spoke under cover of the engine whine.

"You've got a hold-out, right?"

"Sure. I always carry a weapon that'll get past a scanner."

The engines whined to a halt, and the cockpits lifted. A ginger-haired Wookiee stood in the cockpit of the nearest and lowered himself to the ground. "Good," Thrackan said, lowering his voice. "It's a Wookiee. They're not very bright, you know. What happens now is that you clip the Wookiee, then we both hop in the fighter and rocket out of here."

Dagga raised an eyebrow. "You can fly an X-wing?"

"I can fly anything Incom makes."

"Won't it be a little crowded?"

"It'll be uncomfortable, yes. But it won't be nearly as uncomfortable as prison." He gave her a significant look. "You can take my word on that last part."

And if the cockpit seemed to be too small for them both, Thrackan thought, he'd just leave Dagga behind. No problem.

Dagga gave the matter some thought, then nodded. "It's worth a try."

She turned to examine the situation more closely just as the second pilot stepped around the Wookiee's craft. Thrackan saw the slim, dark-haired form and felt all the color drain from his face. He turned away abruptly, but it was too late.

"Hi, Cousin Thrackan," Jaina Solo called. "However did you know we've been looking for you?"

"I wonder if you can remember when *you* held *me* prisoner," Jaina said cheerfully.

Thrackan Sal-Solo tried to fashion a smile. "That was all a misunderstanding. And long ago."

"You know . . ." Jaina cocked her head and pretended to study him. "I think you look younger without the beard."

General Tigran Jamiro, the commander of the landing force, whirled up in his command vehicle, rose from his seat, and gave Thrackan a careful look. "You say this is the Peace Brigade President?" he asked.

"That's Thrackan all right." Jaina looked at the black-haired woman who had been with Thrackan. "I don't know who this is. His girlfriend, maybe."

Thrackan seemed a little indignant. "This is the stenographer the government assigned me."

Jaina looked at the woman and her cold eyes and bright white teeth, and thought that clerical assistants were certainly looking carnivorous these days.

Thrackan approached the general and adopted a pained tone. "You know, there's a family vendetta going on here." He pointed at Jaina. "She's got it in for me over something that happened *years* ago."

General Jamiro gave Thrackan a cold look. "So you *aren't* the Peace Brigade President?"

Thrackan threw out his hands. "I didn't *volunteer* for the job! I was kidnapped! The Vong were getting even with me for killing so many of them at Fondor!"

Lowbacca, who had been listening, gave a complex series of moans and howls, and Jaina translated. "He says, 'They got revenge by making you *President*? If you killed more of them, they'd make you *emperor*?' "

"They're *diabolical*," Thrackan said. "It's a *very elaborate piece of revenge*!" He jabbed a finger toward the small of his back. "They destroyed my kidney! It's still bruised—you want to see?" He began pulling up his shirt.

Jaina turned to the commander. "General," she said, "I'd put Thrackan on the first landspeeder into town. He can guide us to our objectives." She turned to her cousin and winked. "You'll want to help us, right? Since you're not Peace Brigade after all."

"I'm a citizen of Corellia!" Thrackan insisted. "I demand protection from my government!"

"Actually you're *not* a citizen anymore," Jaina said. "When the Centerpoint Party heard you'd defected, they expelled you and sentenced you in absentia and confiscated your property and—"

"But I *didn't* defect! I—"

"Right," General Jamiro said. "On the first landspeeder he goes." He looked at Thrackan's companion. "What do we do with the woman?"

Jaina looked at her again, cogitated for a moment, and moved. In a couple of seconds she had the woman's wrist locked and had relieved her of her holdout blaster.

"I'd put stun cuffs on her," Jaina said, and handed the blaster to General Jamiro.

"How did you know she was armed?"

Jaina looked at Dagga Marl and thought about why she'd made her decision. "Because she was standing like a woman who had a blaster on her," she decided.

Dagga, her wrist locked and her elbow hoisted above her head, snarled at Jaina from under her arm. Troopers came to cuff her and put her under guard.

"Let's get moving," Jamiro said.

Jaina marched Thrackan to the first landspeeder and sat him in front, next to the driver. She herself folded down a jump seat and sat directly behind him.

The operation was going better than she'd expected. Jamiro had landed most of his force here, to drive on Peace City, but he'd stationed blocking forces on all routes from the capital to catch any Brigaders trying to flee. The fight in the atmosphere had delayed things a bit, but it had also wiped out the only Yuuzhan Vong ships in the system. Still, a wary alertness prickled along Jaina's nerves. There was plenty that could yet go wrong.

She turned to Thrackan. "Now, you be sure and let us know where your side's first ambush is going to be," she said.

Thrackan didn't bother turning to face her. "Right. Like they'd tell me."

The first ambush took place on the outskirts of the city center, Peace Brigade soldiers firing from atop flat-roofed buildings on the landspeeders below. Blaster bolts and shoulder-fired rockets sparked off the landspeeders' shields, and the soldiers aboard returned fire from their heavy vehicle-mounted weapons.

Jaina, crouched behind the bulwark in case something got through the shields, looked at her cousin, who was crouched likewise, and said, "Want to order them to surrender, President?"

"Oh shut up."

Jaina ignited her lightsaber and sprinted to the nearest building, a two-story block of offices. Lowbacca was on her heels. Rather than burst in through a door, which was what defenders might expect, Jaina sliced open the shuttered viewport and hurled herself through the gap.

There were no Peace Brigaders, but there was a mine set up to blast anyone coming in through the door. Jaina disarmed it with the press of a button, then cut the wire connecting it to the door for good measure.

Lowbacca was already roaring up the stairs, his lightsaber a brilliant flash in the dark stairwell. Jaina followed him to the roof exit, which he smashed open with one huge furry shoulder.

Whatever the dozen or so defenders on the roof might have expected, it wasn't a Jedi Wookiee. They fired a few bolts at him, which he deflected with his lightsaber, then before Jaina even emerged they fled, dropping their weapons and crowding for the wooden scaffolding that supported a part of the building that was being reinforced. Lowbacca and Jaina charged them and were rewarded by the sight of several of the enemy simply diving off the building in their haste to escape. When Jaina and Lowbacca reached the scaffolding, with the eight or nine soldiers still clinging to it and lowering themselves to the street, Jaina looked at Lowbacca and grinned, and knew from his grinning response that he shared her idea.

Swiftly the two sliced the lashings that held the scaffold to the building, and then—with Lowbacca's Wookiee muscles and an assist from the Force—they shoved the scaffolding over. The Brigaders spilled to the ground in a splintering crash of wood and were swiftly rounded up by more of Jamiro's troopers, who had sped around the ambush to outflank it.

Jaina looked up. Enemy on the next roof were still firing at the landspeeders below, unaware their comrades had been captured.

She and Lowbacca had worked together so long they didn't need to speak. They trotted ten paces back from the edge, turned, and sprinted for the parapet. Jaina put a foot on the edge and leapt, the Force assisting her to a soundless landing on the roof.

The squad of Brigaders were turned away, firing into the street below. Jaina grabbed one by the ankles and tipped him over the edge, and Lowbacca simply kicked another over the parapet. Jaina turned to the nearest as he was reacting, sliced his blaster rifle in half with her lightsaber, then punched him in the face with the hilt of her weapon. He sprawled over the parapet unconscious. Lowbacca deflected a bolt aimed for Jaina, then caught the rifle with the tip of his lightsaber and flung it into the air. Jaina used the Force to guide the flying rifle to a collision with the nose of another Brigader, which gave Lowbacca time to heave his disarmed enemy into the street below.

That took the fight out of them, and the rest surrendered. Jaina and Lowbacca chucked the captured weapons to the street, then turned them over to a squad of New Republic troopers who came storming up the stairs.

The shooting was over. Jaina looked ahead to see the large, new buildings of the city center. She saw no reason to return to the landspeeder—she could guide the military to their objective from her vantage point on the rooftops. She leaned over the parapet and gestured to General Jamiro that she would go ahead over the roofs. He nodded his understanding.

Jaina and Lowbacca took another run and leapt to the next roof, checking the building on all sides to make certain that no ambush lurked in its shadows. They then sprang onto the next building, and the next.

Across from this last was what was probably intended to be a wide, impressive boulevard, but which consisted at the moment of a muddy excavation half filled with water. The air smelled like a stagnant pond. Beyond were some large buildings that would be very grand when finished. Jaina knew from her briefings that a large shelter had been dug behind the largest building, the Senate house, and subsequently covered over by the plantings of what was supposed to be a park.

The whole expanse was deserted. Smoke rose from several areas on the horizon. Jaina called the Force into her mind and probed ahead. The others in the Force-meld, sensing her purpose, sent her strength and aided her perception.

The distant warmth of other lives glowed in Jaina's mind. There were indeed defenders in the Senate building, though they were keeping out of sight.

Sending thanks to the others in the Force-meld, Jaina clipped her lightsaber to her belt, hurled herself off the building, and allowed the Force to cushion her fall to the duracrete below. Lowbacca followed. They trotted back to General Jamiro's command speeder. There they found the general conferring with what appeared to be a group of civilians. Only on approaching did Jaina recognize Lilla Dade, a veteran of Page's Commandos who had volunteered to lead a small infiltration party into Ylesia in the aftermath of the battle and set up an underground cell in the enemy capital.

"This is your chance," Jamiro told her.

"Very good, sir." She saluted and flashed Jaina a grin as she led her team into the nearly deserted city.

Jamiro turned to Jaina, who saluted. "There are defenders in the Senate building, sir," she told him. "A couple hundred, I think."

"I have enough firepower to blow the Palace of Peace down around them," Jamiro said, "but I'd rather not. You might see if you can get your cousin to talk them into surrendering."

"I'll do that, sir." Jaina saluted and trotted back to the lead landspeeder. "The general's got a job for you, Cousin Thrackan," she said.

Thrackan gave her a sour look. "I'll give diplomacy my best shot," he said, "but I don't think Shimrra's going to give Coruscant back."

"Ha ha," Jaina said, and jumped into the landspeeder.

Jamiro's forces advanced on the government center on a broad front, repulsorlifts carrying them over the boggy, torn ground, their heavy weapons trained on the half-finished buildings. Starfighters split the sky overhead.

The landspeeders halted two hundred meters from the building. Jaina looked at what she'd thought was a tarpaulin stretched over some construction work, and then realized it was the flayed skin of a very large Hutt. She nudged Thrackan.

"Friend of yours?"

"Never met him," Thrackan said shortly. At Jaina's instruction, he stood and picked up the microphone handed him by the landspeeder's commander.

"This is President Sal-Solo," he said. "Hostilities have ceased. Put down your weapons and leave the building with your hands in plain sight."

There was a long silence. Thrackan turned to Jaina and spread his hands. "What did you expect?"

And then there was a sudden commotion from the Senate building, a series of yells and crashes. Jaina sensed the soldiers around her tightening their grip on their weapons. "Repeat the message," she told Thrackan.

Thrackan shrugged and began again. Before he was half finished the doors burst open and a swarm of armored warriors ran out. Jaina started as she recognized Yuuzhan Vong. Then she saw that the warriors had raised their hands in surrender, and that they weren't Vong, just Peace Brigade wearing laminate imitations of vonduun crab armor. In their lead was a Duros officer, who ran up to Thrackan and saluted.

"Sorry that took so long, sir," he said. "There were some Yuuzhan Vong in there, intendants, who thought we should fight."

“Right,” Thrackan said, and ordered the warriors into the hands of the landing force. He turned to Jaina, his look dour. “My loyal bodyguard,” he explained. “You see why I decided to head out on my own.”

“Why are they dressed in fake armor?” Jaina asked.

“The *real* armor kept *biting* them,” Thrackan said acidly, and sat down again.

“We need you to lead us to the bunker where your Senators are hiding,” Jaina said. “And to the secret exit they’ll use for their escape.”

Thrackan favored Jaina with another bitter glare. “If there was an escape hatch from that bunker,” he asked, “do you think I’d be *here*?”

The bunker turned out to have a huge blastproof door, like a vault. Thrackan, using the special comm relay outside the bunker to talk with those inside, failed to persuade them to come out.

General Jamiro was undeterred, sending for his engineer company to come down from orbit and blast the door off the bunker.

Jaina felt time slipping away. None of the delays so far had been critical, but they were all beginning to add up.

Maal Lah restrained the instinct to duck as another flight of enemy starfighters roared overhead. The villip in his hands retained the snarling image of the dead executor he’d used to try to command President Sal-Solo’s useless bodyguard, and whom the Presidential Guard had killed rather than obey.

The cowards would be thrown in a pit and crushed by riding beasts, he promised himself.

The damutek grown on the outskirts of the capital to house his troops had been destroyed early in the attack, fortunately after he’d gotten his warriors out. But since then they’d been forced to remain in cover, pinned down by the accursed starfighters that patrolled at low altitude overhead. Fighter cover had been so heavy that Maal Lah had been unable to move even a few of his warriors toward the city center to guard the Peace Brigade government.

He gathered that the Peace Brigade fleet had surrendered—more candidates for the pit and the riding beasts, Maal Lah thought. His own small force of spacecraft had at least gone down fighting. And now, he

suspected, Ylesia's government was about to fall into the hands of the enemy.

But even considering these developments, Maal Lah found himself content. He knew that the New Republic forces were about to suffer a surprise, and that the surprise should draw the heavy fighter cover away.

And once he could safely move his warriors, there would be more surprises in store for the raiders of the New Republic.

And many blood sacrifices for the gods of the Yuuzhan Vong.

Jacen and Vale brought their limping X-wings aboard Kre'fey's flagship *Ralroost*. By the time Jacen powered the fighter down he knew that the Peace Brigade forces had folded like a house of cards, both in space and on the ground, and that the New Republic forces were digging the last of the leadership out of their bunker.

Those who had nothing in common but treason, he thought, had no reason to trust one another or fight on one another's behalf. There was no unifying ideology other than greed and opportunism. Neither was likely to create solidarity.

He dropped to the deck, breathing gratitude that the raid was a success. It had been his idea to capture the heads of the Ylesian government, and his fault that Jaina had volunteered to go in with the ground forces. If the mission had gone wrong he would have been doubly responsible.

Jacen first checked out Vale to make certain she was all right, then inspected their X-wings. Both would require time in a maintenance bay before they would fly again.

"Jacen Solo?" A Bothan officer, very much junior, approached and saluted. "Admiral Kre'fey requests your presence on the bridge."

Jacen looked at Vale, then back at the officer. "Certainly," he said. "May Lieutenant Vale join us?"

The Bothan considered the question, but Vale was quick to give her own answer.

"That isn't necessary," she said. "Admirals make me nervous."

Jacen nodded, then followed the Bothan out of the docking bay toward the forepart of the ship.

And then he felt the universe slow down as if time itself had been altered. He was aware of how long a time it seemed to take for his foot to reach the floor, aware of the long space between his heartbeats.

Something had just changed. Jacen let the Jedi meld that had been sitting quietly in some back room of his mind come to the fore, and he felt surprise and consternation in the minds of the other Jedi, a confusion that was soon replaced with grim resolve and frantic calculation.

Jacen's foot touched the deck. He took a breath. He was aware that a Yuuzhan Vong fleet had just entered the system, and that his plan for the Battle of Ylesia had just gone terribly wrong.

"I think we'd better hurry," he told the startled Bothan lieutenant, and began to run.

The huge cutting beams of the engineers' lasers were chopping the vault door into scrap. Jaina shrank away from the bright light and heat. She could sense panic through the vault doors, panic and flashes of desperate readiness from those preparing themselves for hopeless resistance. A few blaster bolts came spanging out of the torn vault, but the lasers were shielded and the blasters did no damage.

Jaina looked at the troopers preparing to storm the Senate bunker, and she thought that was a lot of firepower to subdue a group who might be no more prepared to resist capture than their army or fleet. She found General Jamiro and saluted.

"Sir, I'd like to be first into the vault. I think I can get them to surrender."

Jamiro took barely a second to consider the request. "I'm not going to tell a Jedi she can't be the first into a tight spot," he said. "I've seen what you people can do." He nodded. "Just be sure you call for help if you need it."

"I will, sir."

She snapped the general a salute and trotted back to the vault door. The cutting was almost done. Melted duralloy had frozen on the floor of the anteroom in the shape of a waterfall. Jaina stood next to Lowbacca, who gave her a significant look as he unclipped his lightsaber. Jaina grinned. Without a word he'd shown he understood her plan, and approved.

Jaina ignited her own lightsaber as the laser finished its final cut. With a shove of the Force she pushed the final chunk of the vault door into the

interior, where it rang on the floor. Blaster bolts flashed out of the hole, and someone inside shouted, “*You people keep out!*”

Jaina leapt through the door headfirst, tucked into a somersault, came out on her feet. The blasterfire sizzled after her, allowing Lowbacca to follow through the hole without being targeted.

The room was bare duracrete, with no furniture and few fixtures: the Peace Brigade Senators were huddled in corners, shrinking away from those who were determined to fight for their freedom. Blaster bolts came at Jaina thick and fast. She leapt for the nearest shooter, parrying blasterfire with her lightsaber. Bolts ricocheted off the hard walls and ceiling, and someone cried out as he was hit. The shooter was a big Jenet, and snarled at Jaina as she came for him.

She sliced the blaster apart with her lightsaber, then kicked the Jenet in the teeth with an inside crescent kick. She followed through with a heel hook that dropped the Jenet to the floor.

She saw Lowbacca grab a couple of other shooters, a pair of fighting Ganks, and bang their heads together. Peace Brigade Senators scuttled and huddled for cover. Another blaster went off, and Jaina parried the bolt back into the shooter’s knee. The Force powered a jump that took her the six meters to the Ishi Tib shooter, where she kicked the blaster out of her hand; and then the Force seized the blaster and smashed it into the face of another shooter. His own bolt went wild into the crowd of Senators, and there was a scream. Lowbacca leapt on him from behind and smashed him in the head with one massive furry hand.

There was silence, except for the sobs of one of the wounded. The room stank from the ozone discharge of weapons. Armored New Republic troopers began to enter the room, weapons directed at the Brigaders.

Jaina brandished her lightsaber over the cowering group, its loud *thrummm* echoing in the small room, and called, “Surrender! In the name of the New Republic!”

“On the contrary,” a commanding voice said. “In the name of the New Republic, I call on *you* to surrender.”

Jaina looked in surprise at the tall, cloaked figure that rose from a huddled group of Brigaders, at the arrow-shaped head and writhing face-tentacles.

“Senator Pwoe?” she said in surprise.

“*Chief of State* Pwoe,” the Quarren corrected. “Head of the New Republic. I am present on Ylesia in order to negotiate a treaty of friendship and mutual aid with the Ylesian Republic. I call upon New Republic forces to cease these acts of aggression against a friendly allied regime.”

Jaina was so taken aback that she barked out a surprised laugh. Pwoe, an avowed foe of the Jedi, had been a member of Borsk Fey’lya’s Advisory Council. When Fey’lya died in the ruin of Coruscant, Pwoe had declared himself Chief of State and began to issue orders to the New Republic government and military.

He might have gotten away with it if he hadn’t overplayed his hand. When the Senate reconvened on Mon Calamari—ironically, Pwoe’s homeworld—they’d issued an order calling on Pwoe and all other Senators to join them. Instead of obeying, Pwoe had issued an order *to the Senate* calling for them to join him on Kuat.

The Senate had been offended, formally deprived Pwoe of any powers, and conducted their own election for Chief of State. Eventually—and after a full measure of the usual skulduggery—the pro-Jedi Cal Omas was elected. Since then, Pwoe had been traveling from one part of the galaxy to another, trying to rally his ever-diminishing number of supporters.

“This peace treaty is vital to the interests of the New Republic,” Pwoe went on. “This typical Jedi violence is on the verge of spoiling everything.”

Jaina’s grin broadened. Apparently Pwoe had grown so desperate that he’d decided that he could only regain his prestige and following if he came to Mon Calamari waving a peace agreement.

“I’m very sorry to disturb any important treaties,” she said. “Perhaps you would care to step outside and speak to General Jamiro?”

“That will not be necessary. I call upon the general and the rest of you to leave Ylesia at once.”

The Ishi Tib, lying at Jaina’s feet, began a gradual movement aimed at freeing a weapon concealed somewhere within her robes. Jaina stepped on her hand. The movement ceased.

“I think you should speak to the general,” she said, and turned to the dozen soldiers who had been quietly entering the room during the course of this discussion. “Please escort Senator Pwoe to the general.” Two armored troopers marched to either side of Pwoe, seized his arms, and began carrying him toward the vault door.

“Take your hands off me!” he boomed. “I’m your Chief of State!”

Jaina watched as Pwoe was carried away. Then she bent to relieve the Ishi Tib of her hidden blaster, and straightened to address the rest of the Brigaders.

“And the rest of you”—she raised her voice—“should file out of the room one by one, with your hands in plain sight.”

Soldiers searched and scanned the Brigaders, then cuffed them, before they were allowed out of the vault. Engineers entered and began preparing explosives to destroy the bunker once it had been evacuated. Jaina and Lowbacca waited in the bare room as the Brigaders slowly left.

They were aware of the change in the Jedi meld at the same time, the sudden vast surprise at the appearance of a new enemy.

Here’s where it all goes wrong. The thought sang at the back of Jaina’s mind.

She looked at Lowbacca, and knew that the Wookiee shared the knowledge that their time on the ground had run out.

Maal Lah gave a roar of triumph as the patrolling starfighters suddenly throttled up their engines and pointed their noses to the sky. The arrival of a Yuuzhan Vong fleet had given the infidels better things to do than cruise the air above Peace City.

It was time to meet the enemy, but Maal Lah knew that the battle was lost at the city center. There was no point in reinforcing the Peace Brigade’s failure.

Another course recommended itself. The commander also knew where the New Republic forces were at the present. He knew that eventually they would have to retreat to their landing zones outside of town.

Between these two places he would make his killing ground. And conveniently, the quednak stables happened to be nearby.

He called into the shoulder villip that communicated with his warriors. “Our hour has arrived!” he said. “We will advance to meet the enemy!”

Jacen arrived breathless on *Ralroost’s* bridge to find Admiral Kre’fey already making his opening moves. An enemy fleet had leapt out of

hyperspace, and Kre'fey was placing his own ships between the Yuuzhan Vong and the ground forces on Ylesia.

"Welcome, Jacen," the white-furred Bothan said, his eyes still fixed on the holographic display that showed the relative positions of the fleets. "I see you understand there's been a new complication."

"How many?" Jacen said.

"Their forces are roughly equal to ours. But so many of our personnel are inexperienced, I would prefer not to engage." He raised his eyes from the display. "Fortunately my opposite seems in no hurry to begin a fight."

Indeed this was the case. The Yuuzhan Vong weren't moving to attack, but were instead hovering just outside Ylesia's mass shadow.

"Can you give me a starfighter?" Jacen asked.

"I'm afraid not. Our fighter bays were packed with operational craft only, plus their pilots—we carry no spares."

Frustration snarled in Jacen as Kre'fey's attention snapped back to the display. "Ah," the admiral said. "My opposite is moving."

The Yuuzhan Vong had detached a part of their force and were extending it to one flank, perhaps intending a partial envelopment.

"Easily countered," Kre'fey said, and ordered one of his own divisions to extend his own flank, matching the enemy movement precisely.

Jacen stalked around the room in a brief circle, angry at his own uselessness. He considered returning to his X-wing and flying to Ylesia to Jaina's aid, and then realized that his wounded craft wouldn't be an asset, but a liability—she'd have to detach pilots to look after him, pilots who would have many better uses in an engagement than escorting a crippled ship.

He finally surrendered to the fact he was going to spend the rest of the battle aboard *Ralroost*.

Jacen found a corner of the bridge out of everyone's way and let the Jedi meld float to the surface of his mind. If he couldn't be of any direct use in the upcoming battle, he could at least send strength and support to his comrades.

Jaina and Lowbacca, he sensed, were in motion, speeding toward their fighters. The other Jedi were waiting in their cockpits, waiting for the battle to begin. Jacen could sense them in relation to one another, an array of intent minds focused on the enemy.

Through the meld, he sensed the Yuuzhan Vong fleet make another move, another division shifting out onto the flank, extending it farther into space. Only half a minute later did he hear Kre'fey's staff announce the move, followed by the Bothan admiral's counter.

The Yuuzhan Vong kept moving to the flank. And Jacen began to wonder why.

Pwoe and Thrackan Sal-Solo, cuffed, were keeping each other company in the back of the landspeeder. Neither of the illusory Presidents seemed to have much to say to the other, or to anyone else, at least not since Thrackan's muttered, "Do I really have to sit with the Squid Head?" as Pwoe was directed into the vehicle.

As it turned out there was no room for Thrackan or anyone else to sit. The landspeeders were standing room only, packed with soldiers, prisoners, and refugees.

The vehicles moved as fast as possible toward the landing zone, though they were being slowed by crowds of refugees, slaves, and other unwilling workers begging for transport offplanet. As many as could fit into the landspeeders were pulled aboard. In their withdrawal to the landing zone the speeders hadn't gotten onto the roads in any particular order, and the speeder that Jaina shared with Lowbacca, Thrackan, and Pwoe was more or less in the middle of the column.

The column had reached the outskirts of the city, which at this point consisted of a strip of buildings on either side of the main road, all surrounded by wild country, unaltered terrain.

Jaina turned at the sound of an explosion behind her, a concussion followed by a shock wave that she could feel in her insides. Smoke and debris jetted high over the surrounding buildings. The engineers had just destroyed the Brigaders' bunker, as well as the Palace of Peace and other public buildings.

Jaina turned to face forward just as a giant, lichen-colored beast stepped from behind a building into the road in front of the column. Jaina's heart thundered as the lead landspeeder crashed into the animal, enraging the beast even though the inertial dampeners on the machine saved the crew and passengers. Another speeder smashed into the first from behind, preventing it from reversing. The beast reared onto its hind legs, and Jaina

saw Yuuzhan Vong warriors clinging for dear life to their basket on the beast's back. Shields sparked and failed as the quednak's first four feet dropped massively onto the speeder. Jaina could hear the screams of the passengers as they died.

Jaina reached for her lightsaber, then her blaster, then hesitated. None of her weapons could kill this animal.

Vehicle-mounted weapons split the air as they opened fire on the riding beast. The quednak screamed and charged forward, crushing the forepart of a second landspeeder and brushing aside a third. One of its riders was hurled from his seat and flew, arms windmilling, into the side of a nearby building.

"Back! Back! Take a side street out of here!" The officer in command of the landspeeder barked orders to the driver. And then Jaina felt a shadow fall over her, and she turned.

Another riding beast was being driven out into the road behind Jaina's speeder. Her lightsaber leapt into her hand and she took three long jumps to the back of the landspeeder and launched herself for the riders on the quednak's back.

The Force seemed to catch her by the spine and fling her onto the creature's back, and she gave silent thanks to Lowbacca for the assist as she landed on the broad, flat haunches. She was poised atop the middle pair of legs, her balance uneasy with the creature's lurching, swaying motion. The two riders sat in a shell-shaped box forward. Jaina ignited her lightsaber and charged, her boot driving for traction on the moss-covered surface of the beast's scales.

One of the Yuuzhan Vong in the box leapt out to face her while the other continued to guide the beast. The air reeked of the quednak's stench. Landspeeders dodged from beneath its clawed feet. Panicked gunners at the tail of the column were opening fire, scorching the creature's massive sides, but the quednak remained under the control of its driver.

Jaina's opponent thrust out his amphistaff, its head spitting poison. Jaina slapped the poison out of the air with a Force-generated wind and sprang forward to engage, thrusting right for the Yuuzhan Vong's tattooed face. His circular parry almost tore the lightsaber from her fingers, but she managed to disengage in time, and now she made a less impulsive attack.

Jaina's violet blade struck again and again, but the Yuuzhan Vong parried them all, an intent look visible under the brim of the vondun crab helmet. He was concentrating solely on defense, on keeping her off the driver until

he could trample the maximum number of landspeeders under the beast's claws. Frustration built in her as she redoubled her attack, the violet blade building into a pattern that would result in the amphistaff being drawn out of line and opening the Yuuzhan Vong for a finishing thrust.

Unexpectedly Jaina threw herself flat on the quednak's back. A bright red-orange bolt from a blaster cannon ripped the air where she'd been half a second before. The Yuuzhan Vong hesitated, blinking, dazzled by the flash, and then Jaina rose on one hand only and lashed a foot forward, sweeping the warrior's feet. He gave a cry of pure rage as he tumbled off the creature's sides.

Jaina hurled herself toward the driver in his box, but another cannon opened fire, and the box disappeared in a flash of flame, the heat scorching her face. Frantically she looked for a way to control the creature. The quednak gave a cry of absolute fury and began to back, trying to turn to get at the source of the blaster bolts that were tormenting it.

A volley of bolts slammed into the beast and blew Jaina off the creature's back. She tumbled free, calling the Force to cushion her landing on the duracrete. Even so the impact knocked the breath from her lungs, her teeth clacking together on impact. From the position on the ground she saw Lowie dragging wounded civilians from a wrecked landspeeder, other intact speeders milling amid a swarm of confused refugees and stunned prisoners, and the death agonies of the other quednak, which had finally succumbed to heavy weapon fire.

Then the second beast, the one she'd ridden, took a cannon bolt to the head, and reared as it began to die. Jaina saw the slab-sided wall flank begin its fall, and she scuttled like a crab out of the way as the creature came down in a wave of stench and blood. An agonized thrash of its tail threw a pair of landspeeders against a wall, and then the giant reptoid was dead.

Dead riding beasts now blocked the road at either end, trapping the column between rows of buildings. Overhead came a pair of swift flyers, swoop analogs, that dived over the street, plasma cannons stuttering. Jaina rolled away from fire and flying splinters as superheated plasma ripped the duracrete near her.

The worst threat from the swoop analogs wasn't their cannons, however. Each had a dovin basal propulsion unit in its nose, and these living singularities leapt out to snatch at the landspeeders' shields, overloading them and causing them to fail in a flash of frustrated energy.

Jaina rose to her feet, her head swimming with the magnitude of the disaster. There was nothing she could do against the aircraft without her X-wing, so she staggered across the duracrete to aid Lowbacca in helping injured civilians. With the Force she lifted rubble from a wounded Rodian.

Concentrated fire from the soldiers blew one of the swoop analogs apart. The other, trailing fire, was deliberately crashed by its pilot into a landspeeder, and both craft were destroyed in an eruption of flame.

It was then that Jaina heard the sudden ominous humming, and her nerves tingled to the danger as she swung to face the sound, her lightsaber on guard.

A buzzing swarm of thud and razor bugs sped through the air, racing for their targets—and then Yuuzhan Vong warriors swarmed out of the office buildings on the south side of the street, while from either end of the street they came pouring like a wave over the bodies of the dead riding beasts. From five hundred throats came the chorused battle cry, “*Do-ro’ik vong pratte!*”

There were screams as scores went down before the flying wave of deadly insects. Jaina slapped a thud bug out of the sky with her lightsaber, and neatly skewered a razor bug that was making a run for Lowie’s head. The Yuuzhan Vong warriors slammed with an audible impact into the stunned, milling crowd in the street. The New Republic soldiers were so hampered by the swarms of noncombatants that they were barely able to fire in their own defense. The Yuuzhan Vong leapt right aboard the landspeeders that had suffered the loss of their shields, slashing through screaming civilians and prisoners in order to reach soldiers so tightly packed they couldn’t raise a weapon.

Jaina parried away an amphistaff that was swung at her head, and let Lowie, thrusting over her shoulder, dispose of the warrior who wielded it. The next warrior went down before a pair of lightsabers, one swung high, one thrust low. Jaina readied a cut at a figure that lurched toward her, then realized it was one of Thrackan’s bodyguards in his preposterous fake armor. A shrieking human female, bloody from a razor bug slash and helpless with her hands cuffed, stumbled into Jaina’s arms, and died from the lunge of the snarling Yuuzhan Vong warrior who was willing to run her through in order to reach Jaina. Jaina shuffled away from the thrust in time, and then, before the warrior could clear his weapon from his victim, her point took him in the throat.

The two halves of a razor bug, sliced neatly in half by Lowie's lightsaber, fell on either side of Jaina. She and Lowbacca were able to protect themselves against the buzzing horror, and the troopers were at least armored, but the civilians had no defense and were being torn to shreds. The handcuffed prisoners were even more helpless. "We've got to get these people into the buildings where we can protect them!" Jaina shouted to anyone who could hear. "Get them moving!"

With shouts and gestures, Jaina and Lowie rounded up a group of soldiers who helped to herd the civilians into the buildings on the north side of the street. This gave other soldiers, and the few landspeeders that were still in operation, a clearer field of fire, and the Yuuzhan Vong began to take more casualties.

In the midst of the confusion Jaina saw General Jamiro staggering backward with a group of his troopers around him. All of them seemed wounded; a squad of Yuuzhan Vong were in pursuit, their amphistaffs rising and falling in a deadly, urgent rhythm.

"Lowie! It's the general!" The Jedi charged, lightsabers swinging. Jaina hamstringed one enemy warrior, then ducked the lunge of another to drive her lightsaber up through the armpit, the one part unprotected by armor. A third Yuuzhan Vong was knocked to his knees by a Force-aided double kick, after which one of Jamiro's troopers shot him with a point-blank blaster bolt.

Two of the soldiers grabbed Jamiro under the arms and hustled him to one of the buildings on the north side of the street, a restaurant with booths by the viewports and a bar against the back wall. There, other soldiers firing from the viewports had clear fields of fire and were able to score hits on any pursuers. Lowie and Jaina covered the retreat, blocking one shot after another with their lightsabers before rolling backward through the viewports.

The room was filled with stunned people, most of them civilians slumped at the tables. Jaina recognized Pwoe standing tall among them, his face bloody, one tentacle sliced neatly off by a razor bug.

The Yuuzhan Vong were still fighting, trying to get into the buildings. Jaina and Lowbacca each chose a viewport, cutting and parrying through the opening while the soldiers fired continuously at the attackers.

It was flanking fire that eventually drove the attackers away. The Yuuzhan Vong had ambushed only the first half of the returning convoy.

The rear part of the column was largely intact, though unable to maneuver its speeders over the dead riding beast that blocked the road. Instead Colonel Tosh, in command of the rear guard, pulled his soldiers off the landspeeders and sent them climbing up the massive flank of the dead *quednak*. From its summit the troopers commenced massed volley fire on the street below, a fire intense enough to cause the *Yuuzhan Vong* to fall back to the buildings on the southern side of the street.

Jaina extinguished her lightsaber and gasped for air. It was amazing how fast things had gone wrong.

Time was running out. And with it, lives.

General Jamiro stood gasping for breath, one arm propping him against a wall while he talked into his comm unit. Blood stained his white body armor. He looked up. "What's behind us?" he said. "Can we pull back to the north, then rendezvous with the landspeeders?"

One of the soldiers made a quick check, then returned. "It's uncleared forest, sir," he reported. "The landspeeders couldn't get through it, but we could move through on foot."

"Negative." Jamiro shook his head. "We'd lose all cohesion in the woods and the *Vong* would hunt us to death." He turned to look out the shattered front viewport. "We've got to get back to the landspeeders somehow, then take another route around the roadblock." He looked grim, and pressed a hand to a wound on his thigh. "Tell Colonel Tosh he's got to give us covering fire as we break out. But we're still going to lose a lot of people once everyone gets into the street."

Jaina became aware that her comlink was bleeping at her. She answered. "This is Solo."

"This is Colonel Fel. Are you in difficulty? The other Jedi seemed to think so."

Relief sang through Jaina at the sound of Jag's voice, though the relief was followed immediately by embarrassment at its intensity. She struggled to keep her voice calm and military as she answered. "The column's run into an ambush and has been pinned down," she said. "What's your location?"

"I'm with Twin Suns Squadron in orbit. We're on standby, waiting for you and Lowbacca to rejoin us. An enemy fleet has appeared and the situation has grown urgent. It's imperative that the landing force return to orbit as soon as possible."

"You don't say," Jaina snapped, her relief fading before annoyance at Jag's pompous tone.

"Stand by," Jag said. "I'll lead the squadrons on a bombing and strafing run and blast you out of there."

"Negative," Jaina said. "The Vong are right across the street, too close. You'd hit us, and we've got civilians here."

"I still may be able to help. Stand by."

"Jag," Jaina said, "you've got too many rookies! They'll never be able to stay on target! They're going to splatter a hundred civilians, not to mention the rest of us!"

"Stand by, Twin Leader," Jag said, insistent.

Annoyance finally won over relief. Jaina looked at General Jamiro in exasperation. "Did you hear that, sir?"

Jamiro nodded. "Even if he can't do a strafing run, starfighters might keep the Vong's heads down. We'll wait."

"General!" Pwoe's commanding voice rang from the back of the room. "This is absolute folly! I demand that you allow me to negotiate a surrender for these people before those fire-happy pilots blow us all to pieces!"

The Quarren stalked forward. Jamiro faced him, straightening, and winced as he put weight onto his wounded leg.

"Senator," he said. "You will oblige me by remaining silent. You are not in charge here."

"Neither are you, it appears," Pwoe said. "Your only hope, and the hope of all under your command"—with his cuffed hands he made a gesture that encompassed the soldiers, the civilians, and the prisoners—"is to surrender at discretion. I shall undertake the negotiations entirely at my own risk."

"*Surrender at discretion.*" Jaina was surprised by Thrackan's sarcastic voice coming from the back of the room. Her cousin rose from the chair he'd occupied and limped forward. She could see that the long muscles of his back had also been sliced open by a razor bug.

"Up until now I'd thought the *Jedi* were the most pompous, annoying gasbags in creation," Thrackan said. "But that was before I met *you*. You take the prize for the most preposterous, self-important, prolix fiasco I have ever seen. And on top of that—" He stared at close range into Pwoe's indignant eyes. "On top of that, sir, you are a *fish*! So sit down and shut up, before I take a *harpoon* to you!"

Pwoe drew himself up. "Your display of rank prejudice is—"

Thrackan waved a hand. "Can it, Chief. Nobody's listening to your speeches now. Or will ever again, I guess."

Pwoe returned Thrackan's glare for a long moment, and then his gaze fell, and he retreated. Then Thrackan turned his scowl on the others—Jaina, Jamiro, and the rest. "I'm not a Vong collaborator, no matter what the rest of you think. And I'm not about to let a subaquatic imbecile sell us out to the enemy."

With an air of painful triumph, Thrackan dragged himself to his seat.

From above came the peculiar creaking roar of a claw fighter, passing slowly overhead. Jaina could imagine Jag in the pilot's seat, flying the clawcraft inverted to give himself a better view of the scene below. When Jag's voice returned, it was thoughtful.

"Our forces are on the north side?"

"Yes, but—"

"The Yuuzhan Vong are regrouping—they'll be launching another assault in a few minutes. I'll commence a bomb run with our two squadrons to break up the attack. Tell your people to stay under cover, and be ready to run."

"No!" Jaina said. "I know my rookie pilots! They don't have the experience!"

"Stand by, Twin Leader. And tell those soldiers standing on the dead animal to take cover."

Jaina almost dashed the comlink to the ground in frustration. Instead she gave a despairing look to General Jamiro, who was looking at her with a furrowed, thoughtful expression. Jamiro raised his own comlink to his lips.

"Fighters are about to make a run. Everyone is to get under secure cover, and prepare to run for the landspeeders on my command. Tosh, get your people off that creature and under the speeders' shields again."

And then, with weary, silent dignity, General Jamiro took shelter beneath a table. The others in the room did their best to follow suit.

The roar of starfighters floated through the broken viewports. Jaina, remaining on her feet, stepped to the viewport and took a quick look out.

Black against the western sky was the Chiss squadron, the craft flying nearly wingtip to wingtip, echeloned back from the leader in a kind of half wedge.

Of course, Jaina thought in admiration. Jag Fel would be in the lead, flying along an invisible line down the battlefield between the Yuuzhan

Vong and the New Republic troops. The others were echeloned onto the Vong side of the line—as long as they maintained their alignment on the leader, their fire *couldn't* hit friendly forces.

Laser cannons began to flash on the Chiss leader, then on the others. Bolts fell on the street and on the roofs of the buildings opposite, a clatter of high-energy rain. Jaina dived under the nearest table and found Lowie already taking up most of the room.

"You know," she said, "sometimes Jag is really—"

Her thought was left unfinished. The first wave seemed to suck the air from Jaina's lungs, then transform it into light and heat that Jaina could feel in her long bones, her liver and spleen and bowel.

Twenty-one more detonations followed the first as the Chiss unloaded. Whatever was left of the restaurant viewports exploded inward. Storms of dust blasted in from the street, and bits of debris. And then there was a silence broken only by the ringing in Jaina's ears.

Slowly she became aware that her comlink was talking at her. She raised it to her lips.

"Say again?"

"Hold your positions," came the faint voice. "Twin Suns is next."

Tesar would be in the lead position, with the rest echeloned in the same formation Jag had used. Jaina had no fear that any of the fire would go astray.

"Hold your positions!" Jaina called. "Another strike coming!"

There were sixteen runs this time, two from each of the X-wings remaining. Jaina coughed as wave after wave of dust blew in the viewports.

Again there was silence, broken only by the sound of sliding rubble from the buildings opposite. As she blinked dust from her lashes Jaina could see General Jamiro rise painfully from his position under one of the tables, then raise his comlink to his lips.

"Soldiers, take up positions to cover the civilians! All noncombatants to the speeders—and then the rest of us follow!"

Hands tore the rubble off him, and Maal Lah saw the sky where he had thought he would never see the free sky again. He wheezed as he coughed dust out of his lungs. "It's the commander!" someone called, and a host of hands joined to rip the debris away, then lift Maal Lah free of the wreckage.

Maal Lah gave a gasp at a sudden, nauseating wave of pain, but he clenched his teeth and said, "Subaltern! Report!"

"The infidels made their escape after the bombing, Supreme Commander. But they've left hundreds of dead behind." The subaltern hesitated. "Many of them our Peace Brigade allies."

Pain made Maal Lah snarl, but he turned the snarl into one of triumph. "The treacherous infidels deserved their fate! They should have died fighting, but instead they surrendered and left it to us to give them honorable death!" He managed to turn another grimace of pain into a laugh. "The invaders feared us, subaltern! They fled Ylesia once they had felt our sting!"

"The Supreme Commander is wise," the subaltern said. Dust streaked the subaltern's tattoos, and his armor was battered. His eyes traveled along Maal Lah's body. "I regret to say, Supreme Commander," he said slowly, "that your leg is destroyed. I'm afraid you're going to lose it."

Maal Lah snarled again. As if he needed a young infant of a subaltern to tell him such a thing. He had *seen* the duralloy beam come down like a knife, and he had felt the agony in the long minutes since . . .

"The shapers will give me a better leg, if the gods will it," Maal Lah said.

He turned his head at a series of sonic booms: the infidel landers leaping skyward from their landing field.

"They *think* they've escaped, subaltern," Maal Lah said. "But I know they have not."

Before the enemy fire blew the building down on him he had been in contact with his commanders in space, and devised a strategy that would give the enemy another surprise.

Was it possible to die of surprise? he wondered.

As a tactician, he knew that it was.

Jacen stood in silence and held the Jedi meld in his mind. The last of the landing party was leaving Ylesia, with Jaina and Lowbacca, and the enemy commander still had not made his move. Instead he continued to extend his flank, shifting a constant trickle of ships into the void. Admiral Kre'fey matched each enemy deployment with one of his own. Both lines were now attenuated, too drawn out to be useful as a real battle line.

But why? Why had the enemy commander handicapped himself in this way, drawing out his forces until they were no longer able to fight cohesively? He had similarly handicapped Kre'fey, that was true, but he wasn't in a position to take advantage of it. What he should have done was attack immediately and try to trap the ground forces on Ylesia.

In Jacen's mind he could feel the Jedi pilots in their patrolling craft, scattered up and down the thinned-out enemy line. He felt their perceptions layered onto his, so he knew as well the positions of most of the fleet. And through their unified concentration on their own displays, he understood where they were in relationship to the enemy.

Why? Why was the Yuuzhan Vong commander maneuvering this way? It was almost as if there were a piece missing.

A missing piece. The piece fell into place with a *snap* that Jacen felt shuddering in his nerves. With some reluctance he banished the Force and the comforts of the meld from his mind, and he called up his Vongsense, the strange telepathy he had developed with Yuuzhan Vong life-forms during his captivity.

An immeasurably alien sense of *being* filled his thoughts. He could feel the enemy fleet extending its wing out into space, the implacable hostility of its every being, from the living ships to the breathing Yuuzhan Vong to the grutchins that waited packed into Yuuzhan Vong missiles . . .

Jacen fought to extend his mind, extend his senses deep into space, into the void that surrounded the Ylesia system.

And there he found what he sought, an alien microcosm filled with barbarous purpose.

He opened his eyes and stared at Kre'fey, who was standing amid his silent staff, studying the displays.

"Admiral!" Jacen said. "*There's another Vong fleet on its way!*" He strode forward among the staff officers and thrust a pointing finger into the holographic display. "It's coming right *here*. Right behind our extended wing, where they can hammer us against the other Yuuzhan Vong force."

Kre'fey stared at Jacen from his gold-flecked violet eyes. "Are you certain?"

Jacen returned Kre'fey's stare. "Absolutely, Admiral. We've got to get our people out of there."

Kre'fey looked again at the display, at the shimmering interference patterns that ran over Jacen's pointing finger. "Yes," he said. "Yes, that has

to be the explanation.” He turned to his staff. “Order the extended wing to rejoin.”

A host of communications specialists got very busy with their microphones. Kre’fey continued staring at Jacen’s pointing finger, and then he nodded to himself.

“The extended wing is to fire a missile barrage *here*,” Kre’fey said, and gave the coordinates indicated by Jacen’s finger.

The capital ships on the detached wing belched out a gigantic missile barrage, seemingly aimed into empty space, and scurried back to the safety of the main body. When the Yuuzhan Vong reinforcements shimmered into realspace the missiles were already amid them, and the new arrivals hadn’t yet configured their ships for defense, or launched a single coralskipper.

In the displays Jacen watched at the havoc the missiles wrought on the startled enemy. Almost all the ships were hit, and several broke up.

Kre’fey snarled. “*How can I hurt the Vong today?* We’ve answered that question, haven’t we?”

One of his staff officers gave a triumphant smile. “Troopships report the landing party has been recovered, Admiral.”

“About time,” someone muttered.

Since the wing was contracting inward anyway, Kre’fey got the whole fleet moving in the same direction. The newly arrived Yuuzhan Vong were too disorganized, and too out of position, to make an effective pursuit. The first arrivals charged after Kre’fey, but they were strung out while Kre’fey’s forces were concentrating, and their intervention had no hope of being decisive.

But even though Kre’fey had assured the escape of his force, the battle was far from over. The Yuuzhan Vong commander was angry and his warriors still possessed the suicidal bravery that marked their caste. Ships were hard hit, and starfighters vaporized, and hulls broken up to tumble through the cold emptiness of Ylesian space, before the fleet exited the traitor capital’s mass shadow and made the hyperspace jump to Kashyyyk.

“I don’t want to do *anything* like that again,” Jaina said. She was in the officers’ lounge of *Starsider*, sitting on a chair with a cup of tea in her hand, her boots off, and her stockinged feet in Jag Fel’s lap.

"Ylesia was like hitting your head again and again on a brick wall," she went on. "One tactical problem after another, and the solution to each one was a straightforward assault right at the enemy, or straightforward flight with the enemy in pursuit." She sighed as Jag's fingers massaged a particularly sensitive area of her right foot. "I'm better when I can be Yun-Harla the Trickster," she said. "Not when I'm playing the enemy's game, but when I can make the enemy play mine."

"You refer to sabacc, I take it," Jag said, a bit sourly.

Jaina looked at Jacen, sitting opposite her and sipping on a glass of Gizer ale. "Are you going to take Kre'fey up on his offer of a squadron command?"

Jacen inhaled the musky scent of the ale as he considered his answer. "I think I may serve better on the bridge of *Ralroost*," he said finally, and thought of his finger floating in Kre'fey's holo display, pointing at the enemy fleet that wasn't there.

"Ylesia," he continued, "showed that my talents seem to be more spatial and, uh, coordinative. Is *coordinative* a word?"

"I hope not," Jag said.

Jacen felt regret at the thought of leaving starfighters entirely. He had joined Kre'fey's fleet in order to guard his sister's back, and perhaps that was best done by flying alongside her in an X-wing. But he suspected that he'd be able to offer a higher order of assistance if he stayed out of a starfighter cockpit, instead using the Jedi meld to shape the way the others fought.

"Look," Jag pointed out, "Jaina's got it wrong. Ylesia wasn't a defeat. Jaina's downed pilots were rescued, and so were mine. We hurt the enemy a lot more than they hurt us, thanks in part to Spooky Mind-Meld Man, here." He nodded toward Jacen. "We destroyed a collaborationist fleet and captured enough of the Peace Brigade's upper echelon to provide dozens of splashy trials. The media will be occupied for months."

"It didn't *feel* like a victory," Jaina said. "It felt like we barely escaped with our necks."

"That's only because you don't have a sufficiently detached perspective," Jag said seriously.

Mention of the Peace Brigade had set Jacen's mind thinking along other channels. He looked at Jaina. "Do you think Thrackan's really innocent?"

Jaina was startled. "Innocent of *what*?"

"Of collaboration. Do you think the story he told about being forced into the Presidency could possibly have been true?"

Jaina gave a disbelieving laugh. "Too ludicrous."

"No, really. He's a complete human chauvinist. I know he's a bad guy and he held us prisoner and wants to rule Corellia as diktat, but he hates aliens so much I can't believe he'd work with the Yuuzhan Vong voluntarily."

Jaina tilted her head in thought. Jag's foot massage had put a blissful expression on her face. "Well, he *did* call Pwoe a Squid Head. That's a point in his favor."

"If Sal-Solo wishes to prove his innocence," Jag said, "he need only volunteer for interrogation under truth drugs. If his collaboration was involuntary, the drugs would reveal it." Grim amusement passed across his scarred features. "But I think he's afraid that such an interrogation would reveal how he came to be in the hands of the Yuuzhan Vong in the first place. *That's* what would truly condemn him."

"Ahh," Jaina said. Jacen couldn't tell if she was enlightened or, in light of the foot rub, experiencing a form of ecstasy.

Jacen, sipping his ale, decided that whatever the truth of the matter, it wasn't any of his business.

Thrackan Sal-Solo paced across the durasteel-walled prison exercise yard, his mind busy with plans.

Tomorrow, he'd been told, he would be transferred to Corellia, where he would undergo trial for treason against his home planet.

He'd accept the transfer peacefully, and behave as a model prisoner for most of the way home. But that was only to lull his guards.

He'd catch them at a disadvantage, and bash them over the head with an improvised weapon—he didn't know what exactly, he'd work that out later. Then he'd take command of the ship—he hoped it was an Incom model, he could fly anything Incom made. He'd crash the ship into a remote area of Corellia and make it appear he died in the flames.

Then he'd make contact with some of the people on Corellia he could still trust. He'd reorganize the Centerpoint Party, strike, and seize power. He would *rule the world!* No, *five* worlds.

It was his destiny, and nothing could stop him. Thrackan Sal-Solo wasn't meant to be condemned to a miserable life on a prison planet. Well. Not more than *once*, anyway.

CILGHAL RECORDING

Jedi vs. Sith: The Essential Guide to the Force

28 ABY: This recording takes place after the events
of *Destiny's Way*.

Because Vergere was regarded as untrustworthy, I was cautious of her advice and instructions on any subject. However, I could not ignore the fact that it was she who provided the antitoxin that saved Mara's life, nor could I deny that I wished to know how to produce such chemicals myself.

I met with Vergere in her cell, where she had spent many hours being debriefed by Fleet Intelligence. Although she appeared a bit tired, I found her to be entirely cooperative as she explained her healing technique to me. Essentially, she narrows her focus—her mind and Force-awareness—until it becomes microscopic. While her physical body remains unchanged, her projected form shrinks to an infinitesimal size. In that state, she can rearrange molecules, take them apart, and build new ones bit by bit. She maintains that she uses her tears because they are convenient, but that she can accomplish the same thing with other material.

Afterward, I met with Master Skywalker, who had also discussed Vergere's technique with her. I presented my assessment that this skill presents limitless possibilities for healing, and was surprised when Master Skywalker asked me if I had considered alternative uses. I admitted that I had not, and he explained that Vergere had demonstrated how making oneself small could also be used to conceal one's ability with the Force, or render a Force-user invisible. According to Master Skywalker, Vergere claimed that an enemy has the same chance of finding her as of finding one molecule amid billions of others.

Despite my cautions, I endeavor to learn this technique to the best of my abilities, and to share my discoveries with other Jedi.

OR DIE TRYING

Star Wars Insider #75

28 ABY: This story takes place after the events of
Force Heretic II: Refugee.

Sean Williams with Shane Dix

The natives of Onadax, hearsay went, had fifty different words for dust. Jaina could believe it. The small world was thick with it, in ankle-deep drifts that gathered in corners, thick sediments that fouled droids and other machines, and grit that irritated the eyes. She longed for a vacuum cleaner—or, more significantly, a bath.

It even got in the way of her concentration. As she Force-leapt into the security compound that was the objective of her mission, her foot slipped and she stubbed her toe on the top of the perimeter wall. The injury was small but annoying. She landed with a wince and a silent curse.

Fortunately, her stumble went unobserved. She stood on the edge of a flat, well-lit area that surrounded the compound's central buildings. ODT took its privacy seriously; she didn't even know what the company's initials stood for. Eight rodent-like Jenet guards in four observation towers watched the open expanse, one tower at each of the perimeter walls' corners. Jaina acknowledged the sense of this: Sometimes the simplest security techniques were the best. Advanced technology might have been able to bypass every electronic eye and ear scanning the compound, but getting across that open area without being seen by eight guards was always going to be difficult. Difficult, that is, for someone without the Force.

Remaining crouched, Jaina quickly checked her combat suit to make sure everything was in place. Then, keeping low, she scurried from cover to make her way across the compound.

A guard from the nearest tower spotted her immediately. Before his finger could push the button to sound the alarm, Jaina dipped into his surface thoughts and changed the notion of intruder to a more reassuring just another mynock. Onadax had a rampant, mutant population of the silicon-based pests inherited from the small world's early days as an agglomeration of asteroids, so it wasn't difficult to impress the thought upon the Jenet's mind.

The guard moved his finger away from the alarm button as quickly as he had reached for it, and he turned away with a snort. A second guard, one tower along, also noticed her; Jaina performed the same mind trick on him. By the time she'd reached the inner buildings, six of the eight guards had caught direct sight of her. But after the initial guard had gotten on his comlink to the others to complain about the infestation, the remaining guards were already expecting to see what she wanted them to, making it even easier for her to slip by.

The moment she left the open expanse behind her, she changed her gait to a relaxed, confident stroll, slightly favoring her stubbed toe. She headed for the building that Widowmaker had targeted from orbit.

Her mission was simple. She was hunting droids—or, more specifically, droid makers. After the betrayal of Bakura by the treacherous Prime Minister Cundertol, she and her parents had undertaken to find the source of the Human Replica Droid that had made such calamity possible, while at the same time searching for the leader of the Ryn network that had helped them in the past. Before leaving Bakura, she had eased the name “Onadax” from the mind of a former associate of Captain Rufarr, the Wookiee smuggler whose ill fate it was to ferry Cundertol to and from his entechment, the process that placed his life energy into a droid construct. A hint on the ground had led them to the company called simply “ODT.” Now she was heading into the ODT compound in the hope of reducing the chances of other HRDs popping up elsewhere.

Jaina touched her chest where the Cundertol HRD had struck her. The injury was long healed, but a memory of the blow still ached. It had been unbelievably powerful, even to a Jedi such as herself. Whatever its source, she couldn't allow these replica droids to spread across the galaxy unchecked.

Threepio had examined signal traffic entering and leaving the main compound and located plans including its access points. The outer door was two meters thick and was secured with durasteel bolts thicker than Jaina's arm. It wasn't going to give way for either technology or Force. But that was all right. She had staked out the compound on her arrival on Onadax and tailed a Yarkora security guard as he changed shift. A gentle mental nudge was all it took to make him drop his security pass so she could collect it. As she approached the door, she waved it at a scanner. When there was no immediate response, Jaina took a step closer and tried again. This time a

series of heavy thuds sounded from within the door's locking mechanism. Then, ponderously, as though continents themselves were moving, the door rotated to one side.

Jaina stepped through with her thumb gently covering the activation stud of her lightsaber, knowing that from this point on, her mission would become considerably more dangerous. Threepio had gained access to the basic floor plan of the droid research center, but that was about it. She had no idea how many people worked there, or how many guards patrolled the building, or whether the corridors were booby-trapped. For all she knew, an entire squadron could be waiting around the next corner.

A quick check through the Force reassured her that this wasn't the case. The building was occupied, but not by an army of any description. There were perhaps two dozen people, human and alien, scattered throughout the building. She felt safe assuming that most of these were researchers at work—plus, perhaps, a token security guard.

Of the minds she could sense around her, one stood out—one that was subtly different from the others. She had felt such a mind before, and sensing it again now brought her both satisfaction and apprehension.

The huge door shut behind her with a resounding clang. She cursed under her breath, expecting the noise to attract attention to her presence. But after waiting silently in anticipation of an alarm, none sounded.

Too easy, she thought, moving slowly on her way along high-ceilinged corridors suffused with a warm and yellow light. She couldn't read the mind ahead of her, but the closer she came to it, the more her gut instinct told her that she was expected.

When she came to the entrance to the room where the being awaited her, she activated her lightsaber. Holding it ready before her, she waved the Yarkora's security pass over the scanner. The door slid smoothly open.

"I can assure you," said a voice immediately, its accent thickly Corellian and cut with a cultured edge, "your weapon won't be necessary."

Jaina stared as a good-looking man in his thirties, dressed in simple black coveralls, came into view. The massive room behind him contained two Loronar Corporation Self-Regulating Droidmakers—massive, slab-like machines whose sole purpose was to take large quantities of raw material and turn them into droids. Each unit was shaped like a brick, only much, much larger. Stretching into the distance on either side of the man, with no

moving parts visible through their semitransparent walls, these “bricks” emitted a deep, almost subsonic hum.

She took a cautious step into the room. She sensed no one else there other than the person standing before her, but her apprehension didn’t ebb. “Maybe, but I’m hanging on to it all the same.”

The man laughed. “We’re all civilized people here.”

“You’ll understand if I don’t take your word on that,” Jaina said, moving a couple of steps closer. She kept her eye on him the whole time. He was definitely lying on at least one point: His mind didn’t belong to a person at all. Not anymore, anyway.

“Such hostility,” he said, casually moving deeper into the room, his back turned toward her as both an invitation to follow him and a gesture of trust. “Let me see if I can work out why you’re here. I have no memory of doing business with you, so you can’t be a disgruntled client. Your unease suggests that you’re not a prospective client, either. Are you a competitor then? A commercial spy? Jedi Knights don’t usually get involved in business matters; they’re above such things, I hear.” He faced her again, holding out his hands in supplication, an exaggerated look of puzzlement on his face. “I’m afraid you’re going to have to help me out; I’m running short on ideas.”

“My name is Jaina Solo,” she began.

“Solo?” The expression on the man’s face became one of curiosity “Any relation to Han Solo?”

“He’s my father.”

“Ah! My brother was at the Imperial Academy with him. A year below, if I recall.” The man nodded keenly. “It’s a small galaxy.”

“I’ve just come from Bakura,” she said, not allowing herself to be sidetracked.

“And how are our friends, the Ssi-ruuk?”

“I believe the Imperium is currently under heavy fire from the Yuuzhan Vong. We don’t know if it will survive. If it falls, that’s one more crime we can lay at your feet.”

His eyes narrowed. “What does this have to do with me?”

“I’m here because of your HRDs. Do you realize that you put the population of an entire planet at risk?”

“Impossible. Human Replica Droids are designed to save lives not end them.”

"If that's true, then why do you hide out here in the Minos Cluster? That's not the action of someone who's proud of their achievements."

"Perhaps I'm afraid the Galactic Alliance will try to claim this technology for itself." His smile returned. "No, the reason we are here is to avoid confrontation with people like yourself—those who are bent on judging us without having heard our side of the story. And also to protect the identity and reputations of our clients—such as our friend from Bakura."

"Then you admit that Prime Minister Cundertol came to you?"

"I admit only that we had a client from Bakura. I don't know his name. He paid the fee and we provided the service. Then he left. What happened after this is not my concern."

"What happened afterward was that Cundertol murdered the entire crew of the ship that ferried him here in order to protect his secret. He betrayed his world in exchange for a phony stab at immortality."

"There's nothing phony about it, I assure you."

"I'd say that is a matter of opinion."

"And I'd say in return that the galaxy can tolerate many differences of opinion." Before Jaina could respond, the man before her spread his hands, the epitome of reason. "We are running a business here. We cannot be held accountable for what our clients do with their lives following the procedure we offer, no more than we are accountable for their actions prior to it. My responsibility for this Cundertol fellow ended the day he left our labs."

"So it all comes down to the credits, right? As long as they pay, you couldn't care less who they are. It doesn't bother you that you've taken infirm and aged criminals and unleashed them into the galaxy to continue their criminal activities indefinitely."

"You make it sound as though that's all we do."

"What else is there? Uploading stalkers to security networks? Giving psychopaths combat droid parts to play with?"

"We sell life, Jaina Solo, not death," the man returned defensively. "Perhaps if I can explain who I am and how this operation came to be, that might help. My name is Stanton, and but for this procedure I wouldn't be here now. Although the Republic's experimentation with HRDs stalled when their Project Decoy failed, the research didn't stop there. A man called Simonelle picked up where Decoy left off, and he had some success. One of his researchers, Massad Thrumble, actually succeeded in creating a fully operational HRD, which was, unfortunately, employed as an assassin."

"You're not telling me anything new," Jaina said. "Simonelle is dead, and so is Thrumble. We've already checked them out. And the assassin you're talking about was called Guri. She worked for Prince Xizor in the Black Sun organization."

Stanton nodded, as though pleased with her research. "But you're under the impression that she was destroyed after having her memories wiped."

"You're saying she wasn't?"

"Your uncle thought she deserved a chance at a decent life. His attitude was, to our minds, absolutely correct. She had every right to live, as does every sapient being. The fact that she was built rather than born should make no difference whatsoever."

Jaina stepped further into the room, her saber still held at the ready. She knew how fast HRDs could move. "I'm not saying I disagree with that. I'd apply the same principles to her—or yourself—as I would any human or alien. But if she's working as an assassin, or engaging in any form of criminal activity, then it's my job to bring her down."

"I can assure you she's not," he said, adding smoothly, "so your rough justice won't be necessary. Guri has nothing to do with our business venture now. All she did was allow herself to be used as the template on which our subsequent HRDs were modeled. There are parts based on hers in me, as well as all of our clients. She is our mother, if you like, and is held in great reverence."

"She did this willingly?"

"Of course. She had had her assassin programming removed by then. When my brother met her and learned what she was, he immediately conceived of this venture. They were partners during the R&D phase. Afterward, they went their separate ways."

Jaina noted the reference to a brother again. If this brother was the mastermind behind the operation, he was the one she was after. "This is the same brother my father went through the Academy with?"

"You may have heard of him. His name is Dash Rendar."

She blinked, surprised. "But Dash Rendar's dead."

"On the contrary."

"Then where is he?"

Stanton's smile broadened. "You don't honestly expect me to tell you that, do you?"

"If you insist that you're not doing anything wrong, then why won't your brother talk to us? Or to my uncle, at least?"

"And find himself on the point of a lightsaber?" He shook his head. "I don't think so."

He feinted for the door, and she put herself smoothly in his path. "Your reactions are good," he nodded, raising his hands innocently. "I approve. How many years did it take you to master the lightsaber? To attune to the Force?"

"That's none of your business."

"Ah, but this is precisely my business. People should make the most of what they have—or what they can have. You, a Jedi, must surely agree with that. Can't you see the opportunity standing right here before you?"

Stanton's smile was still in place, but his eyes were hard. The reflections of her saber in them seemed to float like tiny, frozen lightning bolts.

"If you're suggesting what I think you're suggesting—"

"Why not? After all, there are no negative side effects. We can make you stronger, more beautiful, taller—anything you want. Using the Ssi-ruuk entechment process, we enable you to retain full connection to the Force. You, Jaina Solo, can be at the vanguard of a brave new regime!"

Jaina tightened her grip on the lightsaber. "I don't think so, Stanton."

"Don't dismiss my offer out of hand. Think of the war against the Yuuzhan Vong—a war you appear to be losing. How long would their biological weaponry last against an army of HRD soldiers? Think of all the people who have died or been injured since the war began. Is there no one you wouldn't have saved if you could roll back time and give them an indestructible body? Think of yourself. I notice you're favoring one leg slightly. Are you injured? If you were to accept my offer, that kind of thing need never happen again. Think about that."

Stanton moved one step closer, and this time she didn't stop him. "Think about it, Jaina, before you say no again so readily."

Jaina did think about it. An image of Tahiri flashed through her mind: Tahiri in a coma, locked in a strange psychic battle with the alien mind trying to take her over. And Anakin, her brother, dead before his time from an injury inflicted by the Yuuzhan Vong.

"Imagine the freedom you will achieve when you've been cut loose from the shackles of flesh and blood," Cundertol had taunted her when the Ssi-

ruuk leader Keeramak had threatened her with entechment. “You’ll be able to live forever!”

Would it really be so bad?

“I can assure you,” Stanton went on, “that our methods have advanced considerably since the early days. There is no pain, no discomfort at all. Only awakening to a new, superior existence. We are also working on ARDs—All-Species Replica Droids—so soon it won’t just be humans who can take advantage of this technology. We will create new body types that have never existed before in nature. There’s no limit to what we’ll be able to achieve!”

“The social implications—”

“Are enormous,” he cut in enthusiastically. “I know. On one hand, the galaxy isn’t ready for HRDs. But consider: We can give people immortality, increased physical resilience and strength, and freedom from all the small irks that make life in the flesh a chore—including death! Who wouldn’t want to do business with us? That this service is currently only available to the rich—or, as in your case, the very deserving—is no fault of our own, since the process is extremely expensive. But that won’t stop trillions of people from demanding it. No one wants to die, not if they can help it. Let the word get out that there’s an alternative to dying and the ensuing riots would make the Yuuzhan Vong invasion look inconsequential by comparison.”

“But on the other hand,” he went on, “isn’t it time someone took a stand against life’s greatest enemy of all—death itself? And who better to do that than the Jedi?”

Jaina’s stare drifted away from Stanton as she thought about a galaxy free from hunger, disease and mortality. That was indeed the objective of the Jedi movement, surely? And if it meant a possible end to the war, didn’t that justify her involvement to the fullest?

But afterward, when the war was won—what then, when the armies that had laid waste to Shimrra’s foul plans returned from victory? Who would keep the HRDs in check, from turning on those who had liberated them from the tyrannies of the flesh? Who would stop them from falling prey to the dark side and destroying everything they had once stood for?

She thought of an invincible Emperor, an immortal Darth Vader, and shuddered.

“No,” she said. “And this time I have thought about it. The Jedi have seen too often what happens when people have nothing to keep them in

check. That you're giving this technology to criminals gives me even less reassurance that your motives are pure."

Stanton Rendar sighed. "I can see that it's going to take more than words to convince you."

She tensed, raising her saber. "Maybe I'm not ready to be convinced."

He laughed. "Jaina, we'd never process you against your will! I simply meant that it might take time to convince you, rather than words. And believe me when I tell you that I have all the time in the galaxy. I'll talk to you again one day, when you're aged and frail and your parents are gone; when your children are older than you are now, and death is lurking in the nearby days ahead—and I look exactly the same as I do today. Perhaps then you'll be more receptive to what I have to offer."

"I wouldn't count on it, Stanton," she said, taking another step forward. "And besides, I intend to be talking to you a lot sooner than that. It'll be one day in the not-too-distant future when you're safely locked up and unable to hurt anyone. Or perhaps even dismantled for spare parts."

Stanton sobered. "Life is all we have, girl. Do you think I'm about to let you take it away from me? I plan to live forever or—"

"Or die trying," Jaina finished for him. "Yes, very droll. My issue with you is not your life or how it is maintained, but what you do with it. More specifically, how your clients use the second chance you give them. If you can't be made to see that you have a responsibility to ensure that no one dangerous gets their hands on this technology, then—"

"Spare me the rhetoric," Stanton interrupted. He glanced at a chronometer set in the wall to his right. "I have no more interest in it than I do in this conversation. So, if you don't mind, I think I'd like you to leave now."

"I have no intention of leaving here without you, Stanton."

"Really?" At a clap of his hands, two lines of ten sleek combat droids filed out from behind the two Loronar Droidmakers. "Word spreads when people ask after ODT. I knew Jedi were looking for me, so naturally I prepared for the worst."

Jaina smiled casually as she surveyed the droids. She adopted a defensive stance, bracing herself for attack. "You'll have to do better than that," she said.

"Of course. No droid could ever hope to be a match for a full Jedi unless it's a Jedi inside a droid." A smile flickered, then vanished again. "But your

death was never my intention, Jaina Solo. While we've been talking, my shuttle has been warming up and my staff has evacuated into it. We'll take our leave now, while you fight your way past these."

"Your shuttle will never break orbit."

"A lame threat at best," he said, grinning widely. "I suspect you'll be a little too busy to sound the alarm. You see, not only will you have to dispense with these primitive fellows, but you'll have to do it as quickly as possible. In about five minutes this whole complex will be going up in a ball of flame hot enough to incinerate any mere flesh within it."

She gritted her teeth, wondering if he was bluffing. "You'd destroy your entire facility just to cover your tracks?"

"We can always build another one. That is, in part, why our fees are so high." Stanton executed a small, facetious bow. "I bid you farewell, Jaina Solo. I hoped briefly that you might see reason. You would be perfect for our cause: such potential, such vitality! But I guess it's not to be, this time. Rest assured, though, that if we do meet again, our conversation will end very differently."

He hurried away as the combat droids moved in to attack Jaina. The last she saw of him was his back disappearing around the corner of a Droidmaker—and then she was parrying furiously, sending energy bolts and droid body parts flying in all directions. The Force flowed through her like an invigorating fire, responding to every demand she placed upon it—enhancing her senses, quickening her reflexes, enabling her to anticipate her opponent's moves a split second before they'd begun them. The combat droids seemed to move in slow motion, flailing ineffectually at her, practically begging to be cut down.

The last one fell in a shower of sparks, loosing one final shot that missed her by a clear meter. It ricocheted into the distance, discharging harmlessly against the far wall. Jaina straightened and surveyed the carnage of dead metal strewn about the floor, fizzing and sparking.

She reached out with the Force in search of Stanton, but there was no hint of him anywhere within the complex. His shuttle had taken off; he was long gone.

Jaina cursed. Five minutes, he'd said. More than three had passed. Cutting her losses, she Force-somersaulted out of the ring of droid parts and hurried through the door. The exit from the compound was closed.

Opening it with her security pass took almost five seconds, each one an agonized eternity. As the massive portal lumbered aside and she ran through it, a bolt of energy crackled over her shoulder, let loose by one of the Jenet perimeter guards. She zigzagged across the open expanse, deflecting anything that came too close with her saber.

At the perimeter wall, she put all her concentration into her leap over the top. Laser fire singed her back as she reached the apex of her jump and began to fall. She rolled to absorb the impact and was up and running before the Jenet guards could take another shot. Under cover of night, and with plenty of dark alleys to hide in, she was confident that no one would catch her—

The compound exploded behind her with a sound so loud it momentarily deafened her. Bright yellow light flared at her back, and the shock wave knocked her from her feet. She flew a meter or so through the air, curling herself into a ball so that when she hit the ground she rolled and sprang back onto her feet, still running. A few meters further, when it was apparent that the worst of it was over, Jaina stopped and looked back to the burning building.

Nothing had survived. The compound was a blazing ruin. All evidence of the Droidmakers was gone, along with the enterprise that had operated on Onadax.

It made her furious to think that Stanton had gotten away. The memory of his smug smile irked her as she turned and headed for the *Millennium Falcon*. But she couldn't afford to linger too long. And, she reminded herself, her mission hadn't been a total failure. The search hadn't come to a dead end. She had a name now. That was something to work with, at least.

I hope you're right, Stanton, she thought, relishing the twinge in her big toe that told her she was still alive, still her. *I hope we do meet again some day. Because when we do, I'm going to make you pay for everything that happened back on Bakura! Or I'll die trying myself....*

She smiled at the thought. It gave her a grim sort of comfort to think this wasn't over. Snapping her lightsaber back onto her belt, she made her way through the dusty and disreputable alleyways of Onadax back to where her parents awaited her in the *Falcon*.

A GALAXY INVADED

The Essential Atlas

The Yuuzhan Vong came from another galaxy. Their technology, used on living things, bore no resemblance to anything developed under the Republic or Empire. They worshipped a pan-eon of cruel and bloodthirsty gods, and mutilated their bodies through amputations and grafts. And they had only one goal—the complete subjugation of known space.

The Yuuzhan Vong completed their intergalactic voyage in 25 ABY, after their flotilla of worldship arks passed the galactic barrier to target the northern quadrant at a spot designated Vector Prime. The advance invasion force, the Praetorite Vong, embedded a telepathic war coordinator beneath the ice of uninhabited Helska 4. Elsewhere, undercover agents softened up the New Republic for invasion. On Belkadan, an alien warrior wiped out a research team so the world could be terraformed into an organic war factory. On Rhommamool, expert spy Nom Anor incited a war with the neighboring planet Osarian. These early attempts weakened the area that would become the main invasion corridor, selected as a result of the intelligence supplied by Anor and his cohorts. At Vector Prime the Yuuzhan Vong hoped to secure undefended worlds and regroup their forces, then plow through the relatively sparsely settled New Territories to the heart of the galaxy, where they'd sever trade lines before identifying a weak point in Core defenses and making a hook-shaped turn at the government capital.

An unmistakable demonstration of Yuuzhan Vong power came at Sernpidal. Secreting a living creature, with the ability to manipulate gravity in the planet's crust, the invaders pulled Sernpidal's moon from orbit. Rebel hero Chewbacca and millions of others died in the sphere-smashing collision. The Vong next took Dubrillion, using battleships and starfighters grown from coral, and began fortifying it as a forward base. Yet these gains did nothing to shake the New Republic Senate, which remained unmoved by the plight of distant Rim settlers and refused to redeploy navies away from the Core to blunt this new threat. A small New Republic force tried to shake the Yuuzhan Vong foothold on Helska 4, but it foundered against

the enemy's foreign technology. A follow-up strike used shieldships to trigger runaway evaporation and rapid freezing, shattering the planet and killing its war coordinator.

Though now aware of the magnitude of the threat, the New Republic still did not alter its basic strategy. The navy positioned itself to defend the major lanes leading to the Core and Colonies, as well as the borders of Bothan Space (at the insistence of Chief of State Borsk Fey'lya). Luke Skywalker's Jedi Knights took a more proactive stance and fanned out to assist. On Bimmieel, Corran Horn shut down a Yuuzhan Vong outpost and earned the enmity of Commander Shedao Shai. On Dantooine, despite Skywalker's personal intervention, refugees evacuated from Dubrillion became targets for an enemy-directed slaughter. Rural Garqi also fell under the aliens' advance, but the fighting there revealed the vulnerability of crabshell armor to bafforr pollen. Since bafforr trees grew naturally only on Ithor, the jungle planet fell next in the Yuuzhan Vong's crosshairs.

The New Republic and the Imperial Remnant massed at Ithor to unite against their mutual foe, assisted in part by a squadron of clawcraft from the Chiss Ascendancy. Corran Horn hoped to avoid a battle by challenging Shedao Shai to an honor duel. Unfortunately, despite Horn's personal triumph, Shai's second in command loosed a bioweapon that exterminated all life on the planet.

Six months into the invasion, the Yuuzhan Vong looked unstoppable. Pushing beyond the wreckage of the New Territories, they conquered the library world of Obroa-skai as they penetrated the Inner Rim. The Mandalorian Supercommandos sabotaged their advance, but the aliens sponsored uprisings on scattered worlds outside the invasion corridor, such as Atzerri. This task was eased immensely by the sheer terror engendered by the Yuuzhan Vong invasion—most worlds had never known such brutality, not even during the worst excesses of Palpatine's Empire. Some New Republic citizens openly became enemy collaborators, operating under the flag of the so-called Peace Brigade.

With their path thus eased, the Yuuzhan Vong smashed Ord Mantell and breached the western quadrant's Expansion Region at Gyndine and Tynna. Hutt Space sat out the fighting, protected by its own treaty with the invaders. Yet the truce proved hollow when the Yuuzhan Vong learned of a Hutt sideline selling intelligence on Vong movements, and a vengeful push into Hutt territory quickly followed.

The New Republic sought allies in the Hapes Cluster, where last-minute diplomacy secured the use of the Hapan fleet of Battle Dragons. The Hapans joined the New Republic to deny an enemy advance on the Fondor shipyards, with Centerpoint Station in the Corellian system as their long-distance backup weapon. Miscommunication on the New Republic side led to Centerpoint's repulsor beam destroying both the attacking fleet and the defending Hapan vessels, making Fondor a painfully costly victory.

Their strike at the Core temporarily thwarted, the Yuuzhan Vong cut the Rimward leg of the Corellian Run by invading Druckenwell, Falleen, and Kalarba. With the Corellian Run and Perlemian Trade Route both severed by invasion, Warmaster Tsavong Lah stabbed in the direction of the Core once more, this time at Duro. In 26 ABY that world fell with little resistance, its space cities blasted from orbit and its groundside refugees annihilated in the crossfire. From Duro the invaders easily took nearby New Plympto, but then stalled their march. By this point, only a year into their invasion, the Yuuzhan Vong had captured the majority of the territory they would hold during the war.

The conflict's second year saw a change in focus, as the Yuuzhan Vong prioritized the elimination of the Jedi. On conquered Duro, Tsavong Lah ordered the citizens of the galaxy to surrender the Jedi if they wished to be spared further losses. Many worlds, including Ando and Devaron, took Lah up on his offer and betrayed their Jedi protectors in an echo of the Clone Wars' Order 66. Luke Skywalker established an underground transportation network (code-named the Great River) to move Jedi out of harm's way and into a safehouse in the Maw black-hole cluster. Eventually the Jedi established a new headquarters in the fortified Deep Core, on a planetoid designated Eclipse.

Skywalker also evacuated the Jedi academy on Yavin 4, and the jungle moon soon became a laboratory for the biological experiments of the Yuuzhan Vong shaper caste. Anakin Solo's adventures there with a dishonored warrior gave rise to an outbreak of Jedi worship among the lowly caste of Shamed Ones, and their secret heresy would contribute to the invasion's long-term unsustainability.

The Yuuzhan Vong failed with their next two plots—poisoning the bacta fields of Thyferra and invading the Rimma world Yag'Dhul—but kept up pressure on the Jedi. The latest bioengineered terrors of the shapers, voxyn,

could spit flesh-melting acid and track Jedi through the Force. A Jedi squad slipped aboard a worldship orbiting Myrkr to destroy the voxyn genetic material, but Anakin Solo died in the effort.

The war's third year saw the subjugation of the Core and the fall of the capital. Despite the loss of his voxyn, Warmaster Tsavong Lah determined he had sufficient military might to invade Coruscant. The Republic's minor win at Talfaglio in the Corellian sector proved only a slight distraction; Lah's authorization of Battle Plan Coruscant in 27 ABY organized the Yuuzhan Vong fleet into a pincer assault, with one element based at Reecee and the other at Borleias. Despite advance warning of the enemy's plans, the New Republic could do little to halt the advance, succeeding only in evacuating most civilians and government staff before the planet's fall. Rather than surrender, Chief of State Fey'lya killed himself with a proton bomb, taking out twenty-five thousand Vong caught within the blast radius.

The New Republic regrouped on multiple fronts. Jaina Solo helped settle a dispute over royal succession in the Hapes Cluster and defeated a Yuuzhan Vong task force there. The ranking members of the New Republic's ruling council settled on recently recaptured Borleias, which became a focus of attack and counterattack. The Yuuzhan Vong landed ground troops on Borleias, only to see them annihilated under an orbital bombardment. In a second assault, the invaders lost their command ship in a collision with the Super Star Destroyer Lusankya.

The fourth year of the war saw turnabout, as the Yuuzhan Vong overextended themselves beyond what their military could defend, recklessly pursuing campaigns against other political confederations including the Ssi-ruuk, the Yevetha, the Imperial Remnant, and the Chiss as the New Republic government found a new home on Mon Calamari. Newly elected Chief of State Cal Omas vowed to take the fight back to the enemy, and Omas's invigorated military .

scored critical hits—including wiping out the flagship of the Yuuzhan Vong Supreme Overlord in the Second Battle of Obroa-skai. Admiral Ackbar believed the New Republic had the momentum to draw the enemy into a trap, and planned an ambush at the foot of a dead-end hyperlane leading into the stellar jumble of the Deep Core. The attack at Ebaq 9 succeeded beyond the most optimistic projections, vaporizing much of the Yuuzhan Vong fleet and killing Warmaster Tsavong Lah. From the spice world Ylesia in Hutt Space came news of a second victory. Cal Omas used

the occasion to announce the governmental restructuring of the New Republic into the Galactic Federation of Free Alliances.

Instead of pulling back to lick their wounds, the Yuuzhan Vong showed their teeth. Barab I, Rutan, and Belderone collapsed under punishing assaults, Galantos gave up without a fight, while the Yevetha of N'zoth fought to the brink of extinction. The enemy took a subtler approach on Bakura, using undercover agents to stir up political chaos. And they left the galaxy in the dark by disrupting the HoloNet communications network, an act of sabotage mitigated in part by the *Millennium Falcon's* preservation of the Holo-Net relay station on Esfandia. The Imperial Remnant was not spared, suffering a rout at Bastion (though Grand Admiral Pellaeon executed a payback victory at the Battle of Borosk). The string of Yuuzhan Vong successes culminated with a raid on Bilbringi.

But Luke Skywalker believed that the war's end was in sight, and his key lay in the Unknown Regions. Jedi teams penetrated the unnavigable territory using classified routes supplied by the Imperial Remnant, and established contact with the Chiss Ascendancy. After discerning the location of the vagabond "living world" Zonama Sekot in the Klasse Ephemora system, Skywalker's Jedi discovered that the planet had a connection to the Yuuzhan Vong dating to prehistory. As a fully-grown seedling of the aliens' spawnworld Yuuzhan'tar, Zonama Sekot was the closest thing they had to a home of their own.

Back in the civilized regions, the war had reached its final stage. The Yuuzhan Vong had stretched themselves too far, and the Galactic Alliance sought a swift conclusion. The Perlemian Trade Route reemerged as an invasion corridor, with Mon Calamari and Coruscant as its opposite anchors. Thanks to Boba Fett and his new legion of Mandalorian Supercommandos, the Yuuzhan Vong took a loss at Caluula. Supreme Overlord Shimrra—by now utterly insane sent his surviving forces to obliterate his enemy's stronghold on Mon Calamari. Half the Galactic Alliance fleet lay in wait at Mon Cal and smashed the advance. But the other half of the fleet—along with armadas belonging to all of the galaxy's lesser powers—had already steamed toward Coruscant to retake their capital.

The sudden appearance of Zonama Sekot in the skies above embattled Coruscant convinced many Yuuzhan Vong that their defeat was at hand. In an unforgiving battle waged amid the mossy cityscape, Shimrra died and the Vong grip on the galaxy shattered. The ranking commander surrendered

his fleet, and many enemy combatants built new settlements for themselves on Zonama Sekot. The Galactic Alliance temporarily moved its capital to industrialized Denon until the rehabilitation of Coruscant could be completed.

IMPERIAL NAVAL ACADEMY LECTURE

The Essential Guide to Warfare

43 ABY: This lecture was given after the events of
Fate of the Jedi: Backlash.

In 25 ABY, alien invasion fleets attacked several remote systems in the norther quadrant of the Outer Rim At Artorias and Vonak, they enslaved whole civilizations.

In response, the New Republic Defense Force let them advance unopposed, allowing them to conquer countless unprotected worlds and enslave as many beings as they wanted.

Seen from the clean decks of the Admiralty, the doctrine made sense—don't waste troops and ships in pointless battles; hold back your forces, build up your power, lead the enemy to a battleground of your own choosing; then fight a decisive battle from a position of strength, and destroy your enemy. That was how the Rebel fleet destroyed the Empire, and variations on the same theme had served the New Republic well.

The top flag officers seemed to know what they were talking about. The new Supreme Commander was Admiral Sien Sovv, a Sullustan with a tenacious reputation as a task-force commander. His chief of staff was a dashing cruiser captain, Commodore Turk Brand.

But neither of them knew how to fight a war. They had no experience in large-scale fleet command, and their campaign thinking was learned from scandocs. Their key aides were specialists in tactical analysis and logistics rather than actual combat veterans, and many of them fetishized military discipline and pride to the point of obedient conformity.

Etahn A'baht, the only fighting admiral to retain a senior role, repeatedly called for a change of plan, but he was marginalized by Sovv and Brand, and resigned his commission less than a year into the war. He went off to take charge of the Dornean Navy in his home sector, and fought the local Vong to a standstill.

Sovv and his team were honest by their own standards, and took no pleasure in the duty of sending troops to fight and die. Necessary was a word used a lot. Heroism, they said, usually cost more lives than it saved. At least that was what their books had told them.

In practice, though, their war plan made the Defense Force seem weak, and made the enemy seem unstoppable. And on a level that really mattered, this weakened the New Republic's fighting ability. Among civilians and low-level military personnel, panic spread without restraint. Most front-line troops went into battle expecting to take a beating from the galaxy's new apex predators.

Thus, the war assumed a grim, depressing pattern—a series of attempts by the military to lure the invaders into a decisive battle, which looked to everyone else like retreats and botched holding actions.

It didn't have to be that way. At Ithor, the Imperial Navy stood and fought, with Bothan and Jedi support. They didn't wait for Sovv's permission before they forced the battle, and they destroyed the Domain Shai warfleet with minimal casualties. Perhaps if Sovv had given them more support, fixed defenses would have been in place, and the Vong wouldn't have burned the jungle as they went down. But it was the Jedi and the Imperials whose reputations were tarnished, leaving Sovv in firmer control of the war.

By now, the admiral and his aides had a good picture of enemy strength and intentions, and believed they could lure a major part of the Vong fleet into a decisive battle. They put their plan into action—and their opponents manipulated them every step of the way.

The New Republic laid their trap at Corellia—and the Vong fell on the undefended Fondor shipyards. Only the desperate firing of Centerpoint prevented the complete annihilation of the New Republic Defense Force. This time, the Corellians took the flak because half of the Hapan fleet was caught in the Centerpoint backblast, but the shock of what Centerpoint did overshadowed the fact that the Defense Force had caused itself even more damage that day, and in a straight fight. The First Fleet was obliterated, the Third and Fifth mauled by enemy minefields, and the New Republic's second-largest shipyard was out of the war.

Now the Vong warmaster took personal command of the invasion armada—Tsavong Lah, 150 kilos of armored muscle, a grinning face all slashed up with scars, and a military brain as sharp as a lightsaber. In three months, he conquered the Hutts and advanced to Duros, on the edge of the Core.

Then he stopped, and offered Sovv a cease-fire.

Sovv accepted. He reckoned that the Vong decision to take the longer southern route through Duro meant the New Republic defenses around the northern Core were impregnable, and he calculated that a pause in hostilities would favor his shipbuilding and recruitment statistics more than the Vong's.

The Jedi Knights—seen by the military as undisciplined amateurs—were allowed to be hunted like animals.

And the Jedi weren't the only people the High Command sacrificed to the enemy that year. The Vong had spent decades infiltrating the Empire and New Republic, laying the seeds of a thousand bushfire conflicts—resentments that festered like infected wounds, ready to flare when they were scratched. Combined with this biggest refugee crisis in years and the looming presence of insane alien conquerors, civilian confidence in the ability of the New Republic to maintain peace and justice collapsed. Hundreds of undefended local governments surrendered to the Vong.

The Defense Force ignored it all. They prioritized shipbuilding, munitions factories, and recruitment. They told themselves it was necessary, and that giving in to emotions was a dangerous weakness.

But they were already losing the war. In the northern and eastern quadrants, the Yuuzhan Vong now ruled.

No one knows if the skirmish at Yavin 4 was a deliberate provocation, Tsavong Lah's way of finding an excuse to restart the war. It doesn't matter. A group of smugglers and rogue Jedi apprentices liberated one of the invaders' largest slave plantations.

There's a holo of Han and Leia's three kids standing on the dirt strip with lightsabers drawn, and Talon Karrde's ships coming in to land behind them to free the slaves. That marked the resumption of the war—but perhaps more important, it served as an example of what the Defense Force was failing to do.

The Vong now showed their hand, using their Duro base to move west through undefended space lanes to Yag'Dhul, then bringing p new fleets to smash the Core defenses on the other side, Sovv's impregnable Northern Line—thrusting through Bilbringi and Borleias, until they were standing right on top of Coruscant.

By now the Jedi were gearing up to fight their own way on their flank—starfighter raids, refugee support, all the stuff the New Republic wasn't doing. To draw them off, the Vong feinted at their own private

psychological flank—with a project to create Force-hunting monsters at Myrkr.

The Jedi fell for it, sending off their best young Jedi Knights on a pointless suicide mission.

Sovv, meanwhile, concentrated his three fleet groups at the capital, anticipating the decisive clash, or planning to destroy the enemy units before they could combine. It almost worked—with a little help from Han Solo, he caught the second-largest Vong fleet near the Black Bantha protostar and won a crushing victory—but their main force converged too quickly, and Sovv was forced to fight in the sky above Galactic City, with his back to the planetary shield.

The Battle of Coruscant was the blackest day in New Republic history, and the nadir of Sien Sovv's career. At the start of the main battle, Chief Fey'lya tried to fire him, so he surrendered the tactical initiative to ensure the support of the influential Senators and evacuated the Admiralty and the NRI halfway across the galaxy to Mon Calamari.

After Coruscant, the Vong ruled the capital, and had consolidated their grip on the Core and most of the Inner Rim, taking tribute from systems that surrendered, and conquering the remaining New Republic bases.

Relatively quickly, however, the Defense Force put forward a new analysis: The Vong had suffered massively from their loss of ships and troops above Coruscant, and were now committed to fortify exposed positions in the Core. This received more emphasis than the enslavement of a trillion beings and the New Republic's obliteration as a functioning state.

Sovv spent the next few months calmly reorganizing the military, training recruits and building new ships, regrouping battle groups that had escaped intact from the rout, and sending them out on meaningless skirmishes to temper them for battle—a tactic the Vong had employed early in the war. Their first offensive move was an intelligence-led raid to assassinate the Vong monarch at Obroa-skai. It was the sort of offer you couldn't really pass up, and perhaps the first smart move they'd made in the whole war—but it was deemed a failure. The Alliance had been fed false intelligence, and the Yuuzhan Vong had sacrificed a spare worldship to sneak the real Supreme Overlord through to Coruscant.

Then, a few weeks later, Sovv managed to force another decisive battle. With Imperial help, he finally lured the enemy fleet into a trap at Ebaq 9 in

the Deep Core, and threw everything he had at them—smugglers, mutineers, conscripts, even Jedi.

And won.

Tsavong Lah's ships were surrounded and besieged, trapped in low orbit under New Republic guns. The warmaster was killed in a brutal lightsaber duel with Jaina Solo. Sovv, at last, had his decisive victory.

Decisive victory, however, proved to have no major effect on the wider flow of the war. The defenses of the Vong occupation zone proved rather more resilient than the Northern Line had been—or else Sovv was content to allow half the galaxy to remain enslaved while he played with his statistics. Kashyyyk, halfway to the void, was now the First Fleet's forward base—supported by a chain of systems stretching back toward Mon Calamari, rather than a linear frontier. The rest was given to the Vong.

The leading Jedi Masters were still regarded with polite disdain because they wouldn't join the Defense Force and had blocked the use of genocide weapons. So they were allowed to launch a mystic quest into the Unknown Regions in pursuit of Zonama Sekot, a legendary living world that figured in the Yuuzhan Vong mythology.

Meanwhile, attempts were made to acquire expendable troops from neutral powers—the entries of the Hapans, Imperial, and some Chiss elements into the war were hailed as a series of diplomatic triumphs for the Galactic Alliance, the powerless new government-in-exile that had come into being alongside the High Command.

Finally, after another year of preparation, the Alliance fleet began to lumber into action. Sovv and his aides devised a complex series of feints and strikes, designed to conquer staging systems for an assault on Coruscant. This Trinity plan proved a disaster. It reminded the Vong that the Alliance systems were more than a series of game preserves for hunting wild infidels. In response, they went on the offensive against the New Republic shipyards, overrunning Kuat and Hakassi before moving on to Mon Calamari.

Mon Calamari was barely saved when Zonama Sekot came out of hyperspace near Coruscant—the mythical world turned out to be a living battle station, a forest-covered Death Star that could summon Force lightning superlasers from its treetops to destroy Vong dreadnoughts. This made the Vong panic. They recalled their entire fleet to face their crazy mythological enemy.

The Defense Force had avoided another pointless mauling at Dac, and now the Vong simply gave them the opportunity that years of campaigns had failed to create. Thanks to Sekot, the enemy's military strength was concentrated in one place—Coruscant—and Sovv had another chance to win a decisive battle.

The battle didn't happen the way Sovv planned. Instead, it split into multiple distinct engagements in different parts of the system. Hapan Battle Dragons defended Sekot against one Vong force, while Imperial Star Destroyers and TIEs established local air and space superiority above Galactic City to support the ground assault, and in a third battle, the Galactic Alliance was thrashed by the new warmaster, Nas Choka. It was all rendered irrelevant by an uprising, secured by oppressed heretics, antiwar factions in the Vong elite, and a few veteran Rebel operatives who'd wound up in the undercity by accident.

The destruction of the Supreme Overlord's flagship by Jedi Knight Jacen Solo provoked the enemy's surrender, but in retrospect, that may have been less significant than it seemed—the Vong had lost Coruscant, and the fleet battle was basically a brutal draw already. They didn't have the strength or will left to fight anymore.

Under Jedi pressure, the surviving Vong were resettled in the Unknown Regions without further punishment, prompting Sovv to haul down his flag in protest; but the civilian government proved unable to function without him, and he was soon reappointed as Supreme Commander.

In hindsight, it seems clear that the Vong's success owed a great deal to the New Republic and Galactic Alliance failings. The Defense Force commanders surrendered territory and world to chase the mirage of a decisive fleet battle.

They also neglected commerce raiding, pinpoint attacks, and local defense—tactics that had been instrumental for the Rebellion. Above all, they didn't allow local commanders much freedom to maneuver. Tsavong Lah was more than half monster, but at least he rewarded initiative, whereas Sovv sidelined and court-martialed people for it.

That's not the whole story, though.

It's all very well to say that Sien Sovv and Turk Brand sacrificed unnecessary lives to the dark gods of logistical discipline. It's probably true.

But no one stopped them, either. A lot of ordinary people saw what they were doing—and let them do it.

And that, I suppose, is what's really meant by the banality of evil.

LEIA ORGANA SOLO RECORDING

Jedi vs. Sith: The Essential Guide to the Force

29 ABY: This recording is set after the events of
The Unifying Force.

The escape ship was still accelerating from Coruscant as I followed Nom Anor and Han into the cavernous chamber that was the bridge. What I saw made me feel as if I were wedged between a dream and a vision, lifted into a realm that was usually denied to mortal beings.

In the center of the bridge, Jacen stood like a pillar of blinding light, feel planted, arms at his sides, chin lifted. The dazzling light seemed to spin outward from his midsection and surround him like an aura. His face was almost frighteningly serene, and also I thought a touch sad. The pupils of his eyes were like rising suns. He seemed to age five years—features maturing, complexion softening, body elongating. I felt light-headed, as if I'd forgotten to breathe.

Across the bridge, a male Yuuzhan Vong—Jacen later identified him as the Supreme Overlord—was pinned to the coarse bulkhead like a captive shadowmoth. Between Jacen and the Supreme Overlord was Jaina, suspended a meter above the deck by horns that protruded from the inner bulkhead. She was paralyzed but conscious, and dangled limply, like a mournful sculpture. Then Jaina's form began to strengthen, and at the same time the Overlord waned. Before our eyes, his disfigured body melted away and the bridge's deck absorbed him like a stain.

Jaina was rescued, but what youth might have remained in my son vanished that day. The sight of him on the bridge is something I will carry with me to my dying day.

LUKE SKYWALKER RECORDING

Jedi vs. Sith: The Essential Guide to the Force

29 ABY: This recording is set after the events of
The Unifying Force.

If I have learned anything from the events of the past five years, it is that the Force is more all-embracing than I ever realized. Light and dark do not always stand opposed but mingle with each other in curious ways. More important, the Force seems to have a will, and it's when we're acting against the will of the Force that we can get into trouble. Anger by itself is not of the dark side unless it is accompanied by a desire to dominate.

When we act in harmony with the will of the Force, we disappear into it. When we struggle against it, we not only sever our ties with the Force, but also feed the needs of chaos.

The evolution of sentience reflects the constant movement between those two poles. Evil—the dark side—won't be eradicated until it has been discarded as an option for acquiring power, subjugating would-be opponents, or offsetting feelings of anger, envy, or exclusion. Where victims of injustice exist, the dark side finds initiates. That is the cycle our actions are meant to forestall, and in this battle the Force is both our ally and our guardian. We serve it best by listening to its will, and serving the good with our every action—by personifying the Force.

But I'm no longer convinced that we're meant to police the galaxy. For one thing, we're too few in number. That was made evident early in the war, and it's likely to hold true for whatever conflicts erupt in the coming years. The Jedi began as a meditative order. Our forebears believed that they could balance light and dark by remaining always in the Force, and thereby perfecting themselves. Gradually, however, as the Supreme Chancellors appealed to the Order time and again for advice in resolving disputes, the Jedi became adjuncts of the Old Republic, then marshals and warriors, taking it upon themselves to uphold the peace, and little by little being drawn away from the Force and into the mundane.

I don't propose that we place ourselves in seclusion and pass our days meditating on the Force—though that might be the path for some of us. But I do advocate attuning ourselves to the longer view, and reaching out

to others who seek to serve the Force. The genetic makeup of each and every one of us augments our ability to tap the Force, but everyone, regardless of his or her genetics, has the potential to use the Force to one degree or another. Perhaps not to move rocks and take giant strides; but in some sense those physical powers are little more than surface effects. The real powers are more subtle, for they involve adhering to the true path, avoiding the temptation to dominate, sacrificing oneself for those who have less, and living impeccable, by recognizing that the Force doesn't flow from us but through us, ever on the move.

